













THE POETRY  
OF  
ROBERT BROWNING

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**The Poetry**  
**OF**  
**Robert Browning**

**BY**  
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**IN TWO VOLUMES**  
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## CHAPTER VIII

### *THE DRAMAS*

OF the great poets who, not being born dramatists, have attempted to write dramas in poetry, Browning was the most persevering. I suppose that, being conscious of his remarkable power in the representation of momentary action and of states of the soul, he thought that he could harmonise into a whole the continuous action of a number of persons, and of their passions in sword-play with one another ; and then conduct to a catastrophe their interaction. But a man may be capable of writing dramatic lyrics and dramatic romances without being capable of writing a drama. Indeed, so different are the two capabilities that I think the true dramatist could not write such a lyric or romance as Browning calls dramatic ; his genius would carry one or the other beyond the just limits of this kind of poetry into his own kind. And the writer of excellent lyrics and romances of this kind will be almost sure to fail in real drama. I wish, in order to avoid confusion of thought, that the term 'dramatic' were only used of poetry which belongs to drama itself. I have heard Chaucer called dramatic. It is a complete misnomer. His genius would have for ever been unable to produce a good drama. Had he lived in

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Elizabeth's time, he would, no doubt, have tried to write one, but he must have failed. The genius for story-telling is just the genius which is incapable of being a fine dramatist. And the opposite is also true. Shakespeare, great as his genius was, would not have been able to write a single one of the *Canterbury Tales*. He would have been driven into dramatising them.

Neither Tennyson nor Browning had dramatic genius—that is, the power to conceive, build, co-ordinate and finish a drama. But they thought they had, and we may pardon them for trying their hand. I can understand the hunger and thirst which beset great poets, who had, like these two men, succeeded in so many different kinds of poetry, to succeed also in the serious drama, written in poetry. It is a legitimate ambition ; but poets should be acquainted with their limitations, and not waste their energies or our patience on work which they cannot do well. That men like Tennyson and Browning, who were profoundly capable of understanding what a great drama means, and is ; who had read what the master-tragedians of Greece have done ; who knew their Shakespeare, to say nothing of the other Elizabethan dramatists ; who had seen Molière on the stage ; who must have felt how the thing ought to be done, composed, and versed ; that they, having written a play like *Harold* or *Strafford*, should really wish to stage it, or having heard and seen it on the stage should go on writing more dramas, would seem incomprehensible, were it not

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that power to do one thing very well is so curiously liable to self-deceit.

The writing of the first drama is not to be blamed. It would be unnatural not to try one's hand. It is the writing of the others which is amazing in men like Tennyson and Browning. They ought to have felt, being wiser than other men in poetry, that they had no true dramatic capacity. Other poets who also tried the drama did know themselves better. Byron wrote several dramas, but he made little effort to have them represented on the stage. He felt they were not fit for that ; and, moreover, such scenic poems as *Manfred* and *Cain* were not intended for the stage, and do not claim to be dramas in that sense. To write things of this kind, making no claim to public representation, with the purpose of painting a situation of the soul, is a legitimate part of a poet's work, and among them, in Browning's work, might be classed *In a Balcony*, which I suppose his most devoted worshipper would scarcely call a drama.

Walter Scott, than whom none could conduct a conversation better in a novel, or make more living the clash of various minds in a critical event, whether in a cottage or a palace ; whom one would select as most likely to write a drama well—had self-knowledge enough to understand, after his early attempts, that true dramatic work was beyond his power. Wordsworth also made one effort, and then said good-bye to drama. Coleridge tried, and staged *Remorse*. It failed and deserved to fail. To read it is to know that the

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writer had no sense of an audience in his mind as he wrote it—a fatal want in a dramatist. Even its purple patches of fine poetry and its sweet melody of verse did not redeem it. Shelley did better than these brethren of his, and that is curious. One would say, after reading his previous poems, that he was the least likely of men to write a true drama. Yet the *Cenci* approaches that goal, and the fragment of *Charles the First* makes so great a grip on the noble passions and on the intellectual eye, and its few scenes are so well woven, that one of the unfulfilled longings of literature is that it should have been finished. Yet Shelley himself gave it up. He knew, like the others, that the drama was beyond his power.

Tennyson and Browning did not so easily recognise their limits. They went on writing dramas, not for the study, which would have been natural and legitimate, but for the stage. This is a curious psychological problem, and there is only one man who could have given us, if he had chosen, a poetic study of it, and that is Browning himself. I wish, having in his mature age read *Strafford* over, and then read his other dramas—all of them full of the same dramatic weaknesses as *Strafford*—he had analysed himself as “the poet who would be a dramatist and could not.” Indeed, it is a pity he did not do this. He was capable of smiling benignly at himself, and sketching himself as if he were another man ; a thing of which Tennyson, who took himself with awful seriousness, and walked with himself as a Druid : might have

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walked in the sacred grove of Mona, was quite incapable.

However, the three important dramas of Tennyson are better, as dramas, than Browning's. That is natural enough. For Browning's dramas were written when he was young, when his knowledge of the dramatic art was small, and when his intellectual powers were not fully developed. Tennyson wrote his when his knowledge of the Drama was great, and when his intellect had undergone years of careful training. He studied the composition and architecture of the best plays ; he worked at the stage situations ; he created a blank verse for his plays quite different from that he used in his poems, and a disagreeable thing it is ; he introduced songs, like Shakespeare, at happy moments ; he imitated the old work, and at the same time strove hard to make his own original. He laboured at the history, and *Becket* and *Harold* are painfully historical. History should not master a play, but the play the history. The poet who is betrayed into historical accuracy so as to injure the development of his conception in accordance with imaginative truth, is lost ; and *Harold* and *Becket* both suffer from Tennyson falling into the hands of those critical historians whom Tennyson consulted.

Nevertheless, by dint of laborious intellectual work, but not by the imagination, not by dramatic genius, Tennyson arrived at a relative success. He did better in these long dramas than Coleridge, Wordsworth, Scott or Byron. *Queen Mary*, *Harold*, and *Becket* get along in one's mind with some

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swiftness when one reads them in an armchair by the fire. Some of the characters are interesting and wrought with painful skill. We cannot forget the pathetic image of Queen Mary, which dwells in the mind when the play has disappeared ; nor the stately representation in *Becket* of the mighty and overshadowing power of Rome, claiming as its own possession the soul of the world. But the minor characters ; the action ; the play of the characters, great and small, and of the action and circumstance together towards the catastrophe—these things were out of Tennyson's reach, and still more out of Browning's. They could both build up characters, and Browning better than Tennyson ; they could both set two people to talk together and by their talk to reveal their character to us ; but to paint action, and the action of many men and women moving to a plotted end ; to paint human life within the limits of a chosen subject, changing and tossing and unconscious of its fate, in a town, on a battlefield, in the forum, in a wild wood, in the king's palace or a shepherd farm ; and to image this upon the stage, so that nothing done or said should be unmotivated, unrelated to the end, or unnatural ; of that they were quite incapable, and Browning more incapable than Tennyson.

There is another thing to say. The three long dramas of Tennyson are better as dramas than the long ones of Browning. But the smaller dramatic pieces of Browning are much better than the smaller ones of Tennyson. *The Promise of May* is bad in dialogue, bad in composition, bad

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in delineation of character, worst of all in its subject, in its plot, and in its motives. *The Falcon*, a beautiful story beautifully written by Boccaccio, is strangely dulled, even vulgarised, by Tennyson. The *Robin Hood* play has gracious things in it, but as a drama it is worthless, and it is impossible to forgive Tennyson for his fairies. All these small plays are dreadful examples of what a great poet may do when he works in a vehicle—if I may borrow a term from painting—for which he has no natural capacity, but for which he thinks he has. He is then like those sailors, and meets justly the same fate, who think that because they can steer a boat admirably, they can also drive a coach and four. The love scene in *Becket* between Rosamund and Henry illustrates my meaning. It was a subject in itself that Tennyson ought to have done well, and would probably have done well in another form of poetry ; but, done in a form for which he had no genius, he did it badly. It is the worst thing in the play. Once, however, he did a short drama fairly well. *The Cup* has some dramatic movement, its construction is clear, its verse imaginative, its scenery well conceived ; and its motives are simple and easily understood. But then, as in *Becket*, Irving stood at his right hand, and advised him concerning dramatic changes and situations. Its passion is, however, cold ; it leaves us unimpressed.

On the contrary, Browning's smaller dramatic pieces—I cannot call them dramas—are much better than those of Tennyson. *Pippa Passes*, A



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*Soul's Tragedy, In a Balcony*, stand on a much higher level, aim higher, and reach their aim more fully than Tennyson's shorter efforts. They have not the qualities which fit them for representation, but they have those which fit them for thoughtful and quiet reading. No one thinks much of the separate personalities ; our chief interest is in following Browning's imagination as it invents new phases of his subject, and plays like a sword in sunlight in and out of these phases. As poems of the soul in severe straits, made under a quasi-dramatic form, they reach a high excellence, but all that we like best in them, when we follow them as situations of the soul, we should most dislike when represented on the stage.

*Strafford* is, naturally, the most immature of the dramas, written while he was still writing *Paracelsus*, and when he was very young. It is strange to compare the greater part of its prosaic verse with the rich poetic verse of *Paracelsus* ; and this further illustrates how much a poet suffers when he writes in a form which is not in his genius. There are only a very few passages in *Strafford* which resemble poetry until we come to the fifth Act, where Browning passes from the jerky, allusive but rhythmical prose of the previous acts into that talk between *Strafford* and his children which has poetic charm, clearness and grace. The change does not last long, and when *Hollis*, *Charles* and *Lady Carlisle*, followed by *Pym*, come in, the whole Act is in confusion. Nothing is clear, except

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absence of the clearness required for a drama. But the previous Acts are even more obscure; not indeed for their readers, but for hearers in a theatre who—since they are hurried on at once to new matter—are forced to take in on the instant what the dramatist means. It would be impossible to tell at first hearing what the chopped-up sentences, the interrupted phrases, the interjected “nots” and “buts” and “yets” are intended to convey. The conversation is mangled. This vice does not prevail in the other dramas to the same extent as in *Strafford*. Browning had learnt his lesson, I suppose, when he saw *Strafford* represented. But it sorely prevails in *Colombe's Birthday*.

*Strafford* is brought before us as a politician, as the leader of the king's side in an austere crisis of England's history. The first scene puts the great quarrel forward as the ground on which the drama is to be wrought. An attempt is made to represent the various elements of the popular storm in the characters of Pym, Hampden, the younger Vane and others, and especially in the relations between Pym and *Strafford*, who are set over, one against the other, with some literary power. But the lines on which the action is wrought are not simple. No audience could follow the elaborate network of intrigue which, in Browning's effort to represent too much of the history, he has made so confused. Strong characterisation perishes in this effort to write a history rather than a drama. What we chiefly see of the crisis is a series of

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political intrigues at the Court carried out by base persons, of whom the queen is the basest, to ruin Strafford; the futility of Strafford's sentimental love of the king, whom he despises while he loves him; Strafford's blustering weakness and blindness when he forces his way into the Parliament House, and the contemptible meanness of Charles. The low intrigues of the Court leave the strongest impression on the mind, not the mighty struggle, not the fate of the Monarchy and its dark supporter.

Browning tries—as if he had forgotten that which should have been first in his mind—to lift the main struggle into importance in the last Act, but he fails. That which ought to be tragic is merely sentimental. Indeed, sentimentality is the curse of the play. Strafford's love of the king is almost maudlin. The scenes between Strafford and Pym in which their ancient friendship is introduced are over-sentimentalised, not only for their characters, but for the great destinies at stake. Even at the last, when Pym and Strafford forgive each other and speak of meeting hereafter, good sense is violated, and the natural dignity of the scene, and the characters of the men. Strafford is weaker here, if that were possible, than he is in the rest of the drama. Nothing can be more unlike the man.

Pym is intended to be especially strong. He is made a blusterer. He was a gentleman, but in this last scene he is hateful. As to Charles he was always a selfish liar, but he was not a coward, and a coward he becomes in this play. He, too, is

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sentimentalised by his uxoriousness. Lady Carlisle is invented. I wish she had not been. Strafford's misfortunes were deep enough without having her in love with him. I do not believe, moreover, that any woman in the whole world from the very beginning was ever so obscure in her speech to the man she loves as Lady Carlisle was to Strafford. And the motive of her obscurity—that if she discloses the King's perfidy she robs Strafford of that which is dearest to him—his belief in the King's affection for him—is no doubt very fine, but the woman was either not in love who argued in that way, or a fool ; for Strafford knew, and lets her understand that he knew, the treachery of the King. But Browning meant her to be in love, and to be clever.

The next play Browning wrote, undeterred by the fate of *Strafford*, was *King Victor and King Charles*. The subject is historical, but it is modified by Browning, quite legitimately, to suit his own purposes. In itself the plot is uninteresting. King Victor, having brought the kingdom to the verge of ruin,\* abdicates and hands the crown to his son, believing him to be a weak-minded person whose mistakes will bring him—Victor—back to the throne, when he can throw upon the young king the responsibility of the mess he has himself made of the kingdom. Charles turns out to be a strong character, sets right the foreign affairs of the kingdom, and repairs his father's misgovernment. Then Victor, envious and longing for power,

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conspires to resume the throne, and taken prisoner, begs back the crown. Charles, touched as a son, and against his better judgment, restores his father, who immediately and conveniently dies. It is a play of court intrigue and of politics, and these are not made interesting by any action, such as we call dramatic, in the play. From end to end there is no inter-movement of public passion. There are only four characters. D'Ormea, the minister, is a mere stick in a prime-minister's robes and serves Victor and Charles with equal ease, in order to keep his place. He is not even subtle in his rôle. When we think what Browning would have made of him in a single poem, and contrast it with what he has made of him here, we are again impressed with Browning's strange loss of power when he is writing dramas. Victor and Charles are better drawn than any characters in *Strafford*; and Polyxena is a great advance on Lady Carlisle. But this piece is not a drama; it is a study of soul-situations, and none of them are of any vital importance. There is far too great an improbability in the conception of Charles. A weak man in private becomes a strong man in public life. To represent him, having known and felt his strength, as relapsing into his previous weakness when it endangers all his work, is quite too foolish. He did not do it in history. Browning, with astonishing want of insight, makes him do it here, and adds to it a foolish anger with his wife because she advises him against it. And the reason he does it and is angry with his wife, is a merely

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sentimental one—a private, unreasoning, childish love of his father, such a love as Strafford is supposed to have for Charles I.—the kind of love which intruded into public affairs ruins them, and which, being feeble and for an unworthy object, injures him who gives it and him who receives it. Even as a study of characters, much more as a drama, this piece is a failure, and the absence of poetry in it is amazing.

*The Return of the Druses* approaches more nearly to a true drama than its predecessors ; it is far better written ; it has several fine motives which are intelligently, but not dramatically, worked out ; and it is with great joy that one emerges at last into a little poetry. Browning, having more or less invented his subject, is not seduced, by the desire to be historical, to follow apparent instead of imaginative truth ; nor are we wearied by his unhappy efforts to analyse, in disconnected conversations, political intrigue. Things are in this play as the logic of imaginative passion wills, as Browning's conception drove him. But, unfortunately for its success as a true drama, Browning doubles and redoubles the motives which impel his characters. Djabal, Anael, Loys, have, all of them, two different and sometimes opposite aims working in them. They are driven now by one, now by the other, and the changes of speech and action made by the different motives surging up, alternately or together, within their will, are so swift and baffling that an audience would be utterly

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bewildered. It is amusing to follow the prestidigitation of Browning's intellect creating this confused battle in souls as long as one reads the play at home, though even then we wonder why he cannot, at least in a drama, make a simple situation. If he loved difficult work, this would be much more difficult to do well than the confused situation he has not done well. Moreover, the simplified situation would be effective on the stage ; and it would give a great opportunity for fine poetry. As it is, imaginative work is replaced by intellectual exercises, poetry is lost in his analysis of complex states of feeling. However, this involved in-and-out of thought is entertaining to follow in one's study if not on the stage. It is done with a loose power no one else in England possessed, and our only regret is that he did not bridle and master his power. Finally, with regard to this play, I should like to isolate from it certain imaginative representations of characters which embody types of the men of the time, such as the Prefect and the Nuncio. The last interview between Loys and the Prefect, taken out of the drama, would be a little masterpiece of characterisation.

*The Blot in the 'Scutcheon* is the finest of all these dramas. It might well be represented on the stage as a literary drama before those who had already read it, and who would listen to it for its passion and poetry ; but its ill-construction and the unnaturalness of its situations will always prevent,

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and justly, its public success as a drama. It is full of pathetic and noble poetry ; its main characters are clearly outlined and of a refreshing simplicity. It has few obtrusive metaphysical or intellectual subtleties—things which Browning could not keep out of his dramas, but which only a genius like Shakespeare can handle on the stage. It has real intensity of feeling, and the various passions interlock and clash together with some true dramatic interaction. Their presentation awakens our pity and wonder for the blind fates of men. The close leaves us in sorrow, yet in love with human nature. The pathos of the catastrophe is the most pathetic thing in Browning. I do not even except the lovely record of Pompilia. The torture of the human heart, different but equal, of Tresham and Mildred, in the last scene, is exceedingly bitter in its cry—too cruel almost to hear and know, were it not relieved by the beauty of their tenderness and forgiveness in the hour of death. They die of their pain, but die loving, and are glad to die. They have all of them—Mildred, Tresham, and Mertoun—sinned as it were by error. Death unites them in righteousness, loveliness and love. A fierce, swift storm sweeps out of a clear heaven upon them, destroys them, and saves them. It is all over in three days. They are fortunate ; their love deserved that the ruin should be brief, and the reparation be transferred, in a moment, to the grave justice of eternity.

The first two acts bear no comparison with the third. The first scene, with all the servants



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only shows how Browning failed in bringing a number of characters together, and in making them talk with ease and connectedly. Then, in two acts, the plot unfolds itself. It is a marvel of bad construction, grossly improbable, and offends that popular common sense of what is justly due to the characters concerned and to human nature itself, to which a dramatist is bound to appeal.

Mildred and Mertoun have loved and sinned. Mertoun visits her every night. Gerard, an old gamekeeper, has watched him climbing to her window, and he resolves to tell this fatal tale to Tresham, Mildred's brother, whose strongest feeling is pride in the unblemished honour of his house. Meantime Mertoun has asked Tresham for Mildred's hand in marriage, and these lovers, receiving his consent, hope that their sin will be purged. Then Gerard tells his story. Tresham summons Mildred. She confesses the lover, and Tresham demands his name. To reveal the name would have saved the situation, as we guess from Tresham's character. His love would have had time to conquer his pride. But Mildred will not tell the name, and when Tresham says: "Then what am I to say to Mertoun?" she answers, "I will marry him." This, and no wonder, seems the last and crowning dishonour to Tresham, and he curses, as if she were a harlot, the sister whom he passionately loves.

This is a horrible situation which Browning had no right to make. The natural thing would be for Mildred to disclose that her lover and Lord Mertoun, whom she was to marry, were one and the

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same. There is no adequate reason, considering the desperate gravity of the situation, for her silence ; it ought to be accounted for and it is not, nor could it be. Her refusal to tell her lover's name, her confession of her dishonour and at the same time her acceptance of Mertoun as a husband at her brother's hands, are circumstances which shock probability and common human nature.

Then it is not only this which irritates a reader ; it is also the stupidity of Tresham. That also is most unnatural. He believes that the girl whom he has loved and honoured all his life, whose purity was as a star to him, will accept Mertoun while she was sinning with another ! He should have felt that this was incredible, and immediately understood, as Guendolen does, that her lover and Mertoun were the same. Dulness and blindness so improbable are unfitting in a drama, nor does the passion of his overwhelming pride excuse him. The central situation is a protracted irritation. Browning was never a good hand at construction, even in his poems. His construction is at its very worst in this drama.

But now, when we have, with wrath, accepted this revolting situation—which, of course, Browning made in order to have his tragic close, but which a good dramatist would have arranged so differently—we pass into the third act, the tragic close ; and that is simple enough in its lines, quite naturally wrought out, beautifully felt, and of exquisite tenderness. Rashness of wrath and pride begin it ; Mertoun is slain by Tresham as

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he climbs to Mildred's window, though why he should risk her honour any more when she is affianced to him is another of Browning's maddening improbabilities. And then wrath and pride pass away, and sorrow and love and the joy of death are woven together in beauty. If we must go through the previous acts to get to this, we forgive, for its sake, their wrongness. It has turns of love made exquisitely fair by inevitable death, unfathomable depths of feeling. We touch in these last scenes the sacred love beyond the world in which forgiveness is forgotten.

*Colombe's Birthday* is of all these plays the nearest to a true drama. It has been represented in America as well as in England, and its skilful characterisation of Valence, Colombe, and Berthold has won deserved praise ; but it could not hold the stage. The subject is too thin. Colombe finds out on her birthday that she is not the rightful heir to the Duchy ; but as there is some doubt, she resolves to fight the question. In her perplexities she is helped and supported by Valence, an advocate from one of the cities of the Duchy, who loves her, but whom she believes to serve her from loyalty alone. Berthold, the true heir, to avoid a quarrel, offers to marry Colombe, not because he loves her, but as a good piece of policy. She then finds out that she loves Valence, and refusing the splendid alliance, leaves the court a private person, with love and her lover. This slight thing is spun out into five acts by Browning's metaphysics of

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love and friendship. There is but little action, or pressure of the characters into one another. The intriguing courtiers are dull, and their talk is not knit together. The only thing alive in them is their universal meanness. That meanness, it is true, enhances the magnanimity of Valence and Berthold, but its dead level in so many commonplace persons lowers the dramatic interest of the piece. The play is rather an interesting conversational poem about the up-growing of love between two persons of different but equally noble character ; who think love is of more worth than power or wealth, and who are finally brought together by a bold, rough warrior who despises love in comparison with policy. Its real action takes place in the hearts of Valence and Colombe, not in the world of human life ; and what takes place in their hearts is at times so quaintly metaphysical, so curiously apart from the simplicities of human love, so complicated, even beyond the complexity of the situation—for Browning loved to pile complexity on complexity,—that it makes the play unfit for public representation but all the more interesting for private reading. But, even in the quiet of our room, we ask why Browning put his subject into a form which did not fit it ; why he overloaded the story of two souls with a host of characters who have no vital relation to it, and, having none, are extremely wearisome ? It might have been far more successfully done in the form of *In a Balcony*, which Browning himself does not class as a drama.

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*Luria*, the last of the dramas in date of composition, may be said to have no outward action, except in one scene where Tiburzio breaks in suddenly to defend Luria, who, like a wounded stag, stands at bay among the dogs and hunters who suspect his fidelity to Florence. It is a drama of inward action, of changes in the souls of men. The full purification of Luria is its one aim, and the motive of Luria himself is a single motive. The play occupies one day only, and passes in one place.

Luria is a noble Moor who commands the armies of Florence against Pisa, and conquers Pisa. He is in love with the city of Florence as a man is with a woman. Its beauty, history, great men, and noble buildings attract his Eastern nature, by their Northern qualities, as much as they repel his friend and countryman Husain. He lives for her with unbroken faithfulness, and he dies for her with piteous tenderness when he finds out that Florence distrusts him. When he is suspected of treachery, his heart breaks, and to explain his broken heart, he dies. There is no other way left to show to Florence that he has always been true to her. And at the moment of his death, all who spied on him, distrusted and condemned him, are convinced of his fidelity. Even before he dies, his devotion to his ideal aim, his absolute unselfishness, have won over and ennobled all the self-interested characters which surround him—Puccio, the general who is jealous of him ; Domizia, the woman who desires to use him as an instrument of her hate

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to Florence; even Braccio, the Macchiavellian Florentine who thinks his success must be dangerous to the state. Luria conquers them all. It is the triumph of self-forgetfulness. And the real aim of the play is not dramatic. It is too isolated an aim to be dramatic. It is to build up and image the noble character of Luria, and it reaches that end with dignity.

The other characters are but foils to enhance the solitary greatness of Luria. Braccio is a mere voice, a theory who talks, and, at the end, when he becomes more human, he seems to lose his intelligence. The Secretaries have no individuality. Domizia causes nothing, and might with advantage be out of the play. However, when, moved by the nobleness of Luria, she gives up her revenge on Florence, she speaks well, and her outburst is poetical. Puccio is a real personage, but a poor fellow. Tiburzio is a pale reflection of Luria. Husain alone has some personality, but even his Easternness, which isolates him, is merged in his love of Luria. All of them only exist to be the scaffolding by means of which Luria's character is built into magnificence, and they disappear from our sight, like scaffolding, when the building is finished.

There are fine things in the poem: the image of Florence; its men, its streets, its life as seen by the stranger-eyes of Luria; the contrast between the Eastern and the Latin nature; the picture of hot war; the sudden friendship of Luria and Tiburzio, the recognition in a moment of two high

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hearts by one another ; the picture of Tiburzio fighting at the ford, of Luria tearing the letter among the shamed conspirators ; the drawing of the rough honest soldier-nature in Puccio, and, chief of all, the vivid historic painting of the time and the type of Italian character at the time of the republics.

The first part of *A Soul's Tragedy* is written in poetry and the second in prose. The first part is dull but the second is very lively and amusing ; so gay and clever that we begin to wish that a good deal of Browning's dramas had been written in prose. And the prose itself, unlike his more serious prose in his letters and essays, is good, clear, and of an excellent style. The time of the play is in the sixteenth century ; but there is nothing in it which is special to that time : no scenery, no vivid pictures of street life, no distinct atmosphere of the period. It might just as well be of the eighteenth or nineteenth century. The character of Chiappino may be found in any provincial town. This compound of envy, self-conceit, superficial cleverness and real silliness is one of our universal plagues, and not uncommon among the demagogues of any country. And he contrasts him with Ogniben, the Pope's legate, another type, well known in governments, skilled in affairs, half mocking, half tolerant of the " foolish people," the alluring destroyer of all self-seeking leaders of the people. He also is as common as Chiappino, as modern as he is ancient. Both are representative

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types, and admirably drawn. They are done at too great length, but Browning could not manage them as well in Drama as he would have done in a short piece such as he placed in *Men and Women*. Why this little thing is called *A Soul's Tragedy* I cannot quite understand. That title supposes that Chiappino loses his soul at the end of the play. But it is plain from his mean and envious talk at the beginning with Eulalia that his soul is already lost. He is not worse at the end, but perhaps on the way to betterment. The tragedy is then in the discovery by the people that he who was thought to be a great soul is a fraud. But that conclusion was not Browning's intention. Finally, if this be a tragedy it is clothed with comedy. Browning's humour was never more wise, kindly, worldly and biting than in the second act, and Ogunben may well be set beside Bishop Blougram. It would be a privilege to dine with either of them.

Every one is in love with *Pippa Passes*, which appeared immediately after *Sordello*. It may have been a refreshment to Browning after the complexities and metaphysics of *Sordello*, to live for a time with the soft simplicity of Pippa, with the clear motives of the separate occurrences at Asolo, with the outside picturesque world, and in a lyric atmosphere. It certainly is a refreshment to us. It is a pity so little was done by Browning in this pleasant, graceful, happy way. The substance of thought in it and its intellectual force are just as strong as they are in *Sordello* or *Paracelsus*, and are



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concerned, especially in its first two pieces, with serious and weighty matters of human life. Beyond the pleasure the poem gives, its indirect teaching is full of truth and beauty; and the things treated of belong to many phases of human life, and touch their problems with poetic light and love. Pippa herself, in her affectionate, natural goodness, illuminates the greater difficulties of life in a single day more than Sordello or Paracelsus could in the whole course of their lives.

It may be that there are persons who think lightly of *Pippa Passes* in comparison with *Fifine at the Fair*, persons who judge poetry by the difficulties they find in its perusal. But *Pippa Passes* fulfils the demands of the art of poetry, and produces in the world the high results of lovely and noble poetry. The latter only does these things in part; and when *Fifine at the Fair* and even *Sordello* are in the future only the study of pedants, *Pippa Passes* will be an enduring strength and pleasure to all who love tenderly and think widely. And those portions of it which belong to Pippa herself, the most natural, easy and simplest portions, will be the sources of the greatest pleasure and the deepest thought. Like *Sordello's* song, they will endure for the healing, comforting, exalting and impelling of the world.

I have written of her and of other parts of the poem elsewhere. It only remains to say that nowhere is the lyric element in Browning's genius more delightfully represented than in this little piece of mingled song and action. There is no

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better love-lyric in his work than

You'll love me yet !—and I can tarry  
Your love's protracted growing ;

and the two snatches of song which Pippa sings when she is passing under Ottima's window and the Monsignore's—"The year's at the spring" and "Overhead the tree-tops meet"—possess, independent of the meaning of the words and their poetic charm, a freshness, dewiness and morning ravishment to which it is difficult to find an equal. They are filled with youth and its delight, alike of the body and the soul. What Browning's spirit felt and lived when he was young and his heart beating with the life of the universe, is in them, and it is their greatest charm.

## CHAPTER IX

### POEMS OF THE PASSION OF LOVE

WHEN we leave *Paracelsus*, *Sordello* and the *Dramas* behind, and find ourselves among the host of occasional poems contained in the *Dramatic Lyrics* and *Romances*, in *Men and Women*, in *Dramatis Personæ*, and in the later volumes, it is like leaving an unencumbered sea for one studded with a thousand islands. Every island is worth a visit and different from the rest. Their variety, their distinct scenery, their diverse inhabitants, the strange surprises in them, are as continual an enchantment for the poetic voyager as the summer isles of the Pacific. But while each of them is different from the rest, yet, like the islands in the Pacific, they fall into groups; and to isolate these groups is perhaps the best way to treat so varied a collection of poems. To treat them chronologically would be a task too long and wearisome for a book. To treat them zoologically, if I may borrow that term, is possible, and may be profitable. This chapter is dedicated to the poems which relate to Love.

Commonly speaking, the term *Love Poems* does not mean poems concerning the absolute Love, or the love of Ideas, such as Truth or Beauty, or Love of mankind or one's own country, or the loves that

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belong to home, or the love of friends, or even married love unless it be specially bound up, as it is in Browning's poem of *By the Fireside*, with antenuptial love—but poems expressing the isolating passion of one sex for the other ; chiefly in youth, or in conditions which resemble those of youth, whether moral or immoral. These celebrate the joys and sorrows, rapture and despair, changes and chances, moods, fancies, and imaginations, quips and cranks and wanton wiles, all the tragedy and comedy, of that passion, which is half of the sense and half of the spirit, sometimes wholly of the senses and sometimes wholly of the spirit. It began, in one form of it, among the lower animals and still rules their lives ; it has developed through many thousand years of humanity into myriads of shapes in and outside of the soul ; into stories whose varieties and multitudes are more numerous than the stars of heaven or the sand of the sea-shore ; and yet whose multitudinous changes and histories have their source in two things only—in the desire to generate, which is physical ; in the desire to forget self in another, which is spiritual. The union of both these desires into one passion of thought, act and feeling is the fine quintessence of this kind of love ; but the latter desire alone is the primal motive of all the other forms of love, from friendship and maternal love to love of country, of mankind, of ideas, and of God.

With regard to love-poems of the sort we now discuss, the times in history when they are most written are those in which a nation or mankind

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renews its youth. Their production in the days of Elizabeth was enormous, their passion various and profound, their fancy elaborate, their ornament extravagant with the extravagance of youth ; and, in the hands of the greater men, their imagination was as fine as their melody. As that age grew older they were not replaced but were dominated by more serious subjects ; and though love in its fantasies was happily recorded in song during the Caroline period, passion in English love-poetry slowly decayed till the ideas of the Revolution, before the French outbreak, began to renew the youth of the world. The same career is run by the individual poet. The subject of his youth is the passion of love, as it was in Browning's *Pauline*. The subjects of his manhood are serious with other thought and feeling, sad with another sadness, happy with another happiness. They traverse a wider range of human feeling and thought, and when they speak of love, it is of love in its wiser, steadier, graver and less selfish forms. It was so with Browning, who far sooner than his comrades, escaped from the tangled wilderness of youthful passion. It is curious to think that so young a creature as he was in 1833 should have left the celebration of the love of woman behind him, and only written of the love which his *Paracelsus* images in April. It seems a little insensitive in so young a man. But I do not think Browning was ever quite young save at happy intervals ; and this falls in with the fact that his imagination was more intellectual than passionate ; that while he

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felt love, he also analysed, even dissected it, as he wrote about it; that it scarcely ever carried him away so far as to make him forget everything but itself. Perhaps once or twice, as in *The Last Ride Together*, he may have drawn near to this absorption, but even then the man is thinking more of his own thoughts than of the woman by his side, who must have been somewhat wearied by so silent a companion. Even in *By the Fireside*, when he is praising the wife whom he loved with all his soul, and recalling the moment of early passion while yet they looked on one another and felt their souls embrace before they spoke—it is curious to find him deviating from the intensity of the recollection into a discussion of what might have been if she had not been what she was—a sort of *excursus* on the chances of life which lasts for eight verses—before he returns to that immortal moment. Even after years of married life, a poet, to whom passion has been in youth supreme, would scarcely have done that. On the whole, his poetry, like that of Wordsworth, but not so completely, is destitute of the love-poem in the ordinary sense of the word; and the few exceptions to which we might point want so much that exclusiveness of a lover which shuts out all other thought but that of the woman, that it is difficult to class them in that species of literature. However, this is not altogether true, and the main exception to it is a curious piece of literary and personal history. Those who read *Asolando*, the last book of poems he published, were surprised to find with what

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intensity some of the first poems in it described the passion of sexual love. They are fully charged with isolated emotion, other thoughts than those of love do not intrude upon them. Moreover, they have a sincere lyric note. It is impossible, unless by a miracle of imagination, that these could have been written when he was about eighty years of age. I believe, though I do not know, that he wrote them when he was quite a young man, that he found them on looking over his portfolios, and had a dim and scented pleasure in reading and publishing them in his old age. He mentions in the preface that the book contains both old and new poems. The new are easily isolated, and the first poem, the introduction to the collection, is of the date of the book. The rest belong to different periods of his life. The four poems to which I refer are *Now*, *Summum Bonum*, *A Pearl—A Girl*, and *Speculative*. They are beautiful with a beauty of their own, full of that natural abandonment of the whole world for one moment with the woman loved, which youth and the hours of youth in manhood feel. I should have been sorry if Browning had not shaped into song this abandonment. He loved the natural, and was convinced of its rightness; and he had, as I might prove, a tenderness for it even when it passed into wrong. He was the last man in the world to think that the passion of noble sexual love was to be despised. And it is pleasant to find, at the end of his long poetic career, that, in a serious and wise old age, he selected, to form part of his last book, poems of

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youthful and impassioned love, in which the senses and the spirit met, each in their pre-eminence.

The two first of these, *Now* and *Summum Bonum*, must belong to his youth, though from certain turns of expression and thought in them, it seems that Browning worked on them at the time he published them. I quote the second for its lyric charm, even though the melody is ruthlessly broken.

All the breath and the bloom of the year in the bag of one  
bee :

All the wonder and wealth of the mine in the heart of  
one gem :

In the core of one pearl all the shade and the shine of the  
sea :

Breath and bloom, shade and shine,—wonder, wealth,  
and—how far above them—

Truth, that's brighter than gem,

Trust, that's purer than pearl,—

Brightest truth, purest truth in the universe—all were for  
me

. In the kiss of one girl.

The next two poems are knit to this and to *Now* by the strong emotion of earthly love, of the senses as well as of the spirit, for one woman ; but they differ in the period at which they were written. The first, *A Pearl—A Girl*, recalls that part of the poem *By the Fireside*, when one look, one word, opened the infinite world of love to Browning. If written when he was young, it has been revised in after life.

A simple ring with a single stone

To the vulgar eye no stone of price :

Whisper the right word, that alone—

Forth starts a sprite, like fire from ice,



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And lo, you are lord (says an Eastern scroll)  
Of heaven and earth, lord whole and sole  
Through the power in a pearl.

A woman ('tis I this time that say)  
With little the world counts worthy praise  
Utter the true word—out and away  
Escapes her soul. I am wrapt in blaze,  
Creation's lord, of heaven and earth  
Lord whole and sole—by a minute's birth—  
Through the love of a girl!

The second—*Speculative*—also describes a moment of love-longing, but has the characteristics of his later poetry. It may be of the same date as the book, or not much earlier. It may be of his later manhood, of the time when he lost his wife. At any rate, it is intense enough. It looks back on the love he has lost, on passion with the woman he loved. And he would surrender all—Heaven, Nature, Man, Art—in this momentary fire of desire; for indeed such passion is momentary. Momentariness is the essence of the poem. "Even in heaven I will cry for the wild hours now gone by—Give me back the Earth and Thyself." *Speculative*, he calls it, in an after irony.

Others may need new life in Heaven—  
Man, Nature, Art—made new, assume!  
Man with new mind old sense to leaven,  
Nature—new light to clear old gloom,  
Art that breaks bounds, gets soaring-room.

I shall pray: "Fugitive as precious—  
Minutes which passed,—return, remain!  
Let earth's old life once more enmesh us,  
You with old pleasure, me—old pain,  
So we but meet nor part again!"

Nor was this reversion to the passion of youthful

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love altogether a new departure. The lyrics in *Ferishtah's Fancies* are written to represent, from the side of emotion, the intellectual and ethical ideas worked out in the poems. The greater number of them are beautiful, and they would gain rather than lose if they were published separately from the poems. Some are plainly of the same date as the poems. Others, I think, were written in Browning's early time, and the preceding poems are made to fit them. But whatever be their origin, they nearly all treat of love, and one of them with a crude claim on the love of the senses alone, as if that—as if the love of the body, even alone—were not apart from the consideration of a poet who wished to treat of the whole of human nature. Browning, when he wished to make a thought or a fact quite plain, frequently stated it without any of its modifications, trusting to his readers not to mistake him; knowing indeed, that if they cared to find the other side—in this case the love which issues from the senses and the spirit together, or from the spirit alone—they would find it stated just as soundly and clearly. He meant us to combine both statements, and he has done so himself with regard to love.

When, however, we have considered these exceptions, it still remains curious how little the passionate Love-poem, with its strong personal touch, exists in Browning's poetry. One reason may be that Love-poems of this kind are naturally lyrical, and demand a sweet melody in the verse, and Browning's genius was not especially lyrical,

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nor could he inevitably command a melodious movement in his verse. But the main reason is that he was taken up with other and graver matters, and chiefly with the right theory of life ; with the true relation of God and man ; and with the picturing—for absolute Love's sake, and in order to win men to love one another by the awakening of pity—of as much of humanity as he could grasp in thought and feeling. Isolated and personal love was only a small part of this large design.

One personal love, however, he possessed fully and intensely. It was his love for his wife, and three poems embody it. The first is *By the Fireside*. It does not take rank as a true love lyric ; it is too long, too many-motived for a lyric. It is a meditative poem of recollective tenderness wandering through the past ; and no poem written on married love in England is more beautiful. The poet, sitting silent in the room where his wife sits with him, sees all his life with her unrolled, muses on what has been, and is, since she came to bless his life, or what will be, since she continues to bless it ; and all the fancies and musings which, in a usual love lyric, would not harmonise with the intensity of love-passion in youth, exactly fit in with the peace and satisfied joy of a married life at home with God and nature and itself. The poem is full of personal charm. Quiet thought, profound feeling and sweet memory like a sunlit mist, soften the aspect of the room, the image of his wife, and all the thoughts, emotions and scenery described. It is a finished piece of art.

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The second of these poems is the Epilogue to the volumes of *Men and Women*, entitled *One Word More*. It also is a finished piece of art, carefully conceived, upbuilt stone by stone, touch by touch, each separate thought with its own emotion, each adding something to the whole, each pushing Browning's emotion and picture into our souls, till the whole impression is received. It is full, and full to the brim, with the long experience of peaceful joy in married love. And the subtlety of the close of it, and of Browning's play with his own fancy about the moon, do not detract from the tenderness of it; for it speaks not of transient passion but of the love of a whole life lived from end to end in music.

The last of these is entitled *Prospice*. When he wrote it he had lost his wife. It tells what she had made of him; it reveals alike his steadfast sadness that she had gone from him and the steadfast resolution, due to her sweet and enduring power, with which, after her death, he promised, bearing with him his sorrow and his memory of joy, to stand and withstand in the battle of life, ever a fighter to the close—and well he kept his word. It ends with the expression of his triumphant certainty of meeting her, and breaks forth at last into so great a cry of pure passion that ear and heart alike rejoice. Browning at his best, Browning in the central fire of his character, is in it.

Fear death?—to feel the fog in my throat,

The mist in my face,

When the snows begin, and the blasts denote

I am nearing the place, •

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The power of the night, the press of the storm,  
The post of the foe ;  
Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,  
Yet the strong man must go :  
For the journey is done and the summit attained  
And the barriers fall,  
Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be gained,  
The reward of it all.  
I was ever a fighter, so — one fight more,  
The best and the last !  
I would hate that Death bandaged my eyes, and forbore,  
And bade me creep past.  
No ! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers  
The heroes of old,  
Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears  
Of pain, darkness and cold  
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,  
The black minute's at end,  
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,  
Shall dwindle, shall blend,  
Shall change, shall become first as peace out of pain,  
Then a light, then thy breast,  
O thou soul of my soul ! I shall clasp thee again,  
And with God be the rest !

Leaving now these personal poems on Love, we come to those we may call impersonal. They are poems about love, not in its simplicities, but in its subtle moments—moments that Browning loved to analyse, and which he informed not so much with the passion of love, as with his profound love of human nature. He describes in them, with the seriousness of one who has left youth behind, the moods of love, its changes, vagaries, certainties, failures and conquests. It is a man writing, not of the love of happy youth, but of love tossed on the stormy seas of manhood and womanhood, and modified from its singular personal intensity by the deeper thought, feeling and surprising chances of

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our mortal life. Love does not stand alone, as in the true love lyric, but with many other grave matters. As such it is a more interesting subject for Browning. For Love then becomes full of strange turns, unexpected thoughts, impulses unknown before creating varied circumstances, and created by them; and these his intellectual spirituality delighted to cope with, and to follow, labyrinth after labyrinth. I shall give examples of these separate studies, which have always an idea beyond the love out of which the poem arises. In some of them the love is finally absorbed in the idea. In all of them their aim is beyond the love of which they speak.

*Love among the Ruins* tells of a lover going to meet his sweetheart. There are many poems with this expectant motive in the world of song, and no motive has been written of with greater emotion. If we are to believe these poems, or have ever waited ourselves, the hour contains nothing but her presence, what she is doing, how she is coming, why she delays, what it will be when she comes—a thousand things, each like white fire round her image. But Browning's lover, through nine verses, cares only for the wide meadows over which he makes his way, and the sheep wandering over them, and their flowers and the ruins in the midst of them; musing on the changes and contrasts of the world—the lonely land and the populous glory which was of old in the vast city. It is only then, and only in two lines, that he thinks of the girl who is waiting for him in the ruined tower. Even

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then his imagination cannot stay with her, but glances from her instantly—thinking that the ancient king stood where she is waiting, and looked, full of pride, from the high tower on his splendid city. When he has elaborated this second excursion of thought he comes at last to the girl. Then is the hour of passion, but even in its fervour he draws a conclusion, belonging to a higher world than youthful love, as remote from it as his description of the scenery and the ruins. "Splendour of arms, triumph of wealth, centuries of glory and pride, they are nothing to love. Love is best." It is a general, not a particular conclusion. In a true Love-poem it would be particular.

Another poem of waiting love is *In Three Days*. And this has the spirit of a true love lyric in it. It reads like a personal thing; it breathes exaltation; it is quick, hurried, and thrilled. The delicate fears of chance and change in the three days, or in the years to come, belong of right and nature to the waiting, and are subtly varied and condensed. It is, however, the thoughtful love of a man who can be metaphysical in love, not the excluding mastery of passion.

*Two in the Campagna* is another poem in which love passes away into a deeper thought than love—a strange and fascinating poem of twofold desire. The man loves a woman and desires to be at peace with her in love, but there is a more imperative passion in his soul—to rest in the infinite, in accomplished perfection. And his livelong and vain pursuit of this has wearied him so much that he has

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"no strength left to realise earthly love. Is it possible that she who now walks with him in the Campagna can give him in her love the peace of the infinite which he desires, and if not, why—where is the fault? For a moment he seems to catch the reason, and asks his love to see it with him and to grasp it. In a moment, like the gossamer thread he traces only to see it vanish, it is gone—and nothing is left, save

Infinite passion, and the pain  
Of finite hearts that yearn.

Least of all is the woman left. She has quite disappeared. This is not a Love-poem at all, it is the cry of Browning's hunger for eternity in the midst of mortality, in which all the hunger for earthly love is burnt to dust.

The rest are chiefly studies of different kinds of love, or of crises in love; moments in its course, in its origin or its failure. There are many examples in the shorter dramatic pieces, as *In a Balcony*; and even in the longer dramas certain sharp climaxes of love are recorded, not as if they belonged to the drama, but as if they were distinct studies introduced by chance or caprice. In the short poems called "dramatic," these studies are numerous, and I group a few of them together according to their motives, leaving out some which I shall hereafter treat of when I come to discuss the women of Browning. *Evelyn Hope* has nothing to do with the passion of love. The physical element of love is entirely excluded by the subject.



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It is a beautiful expression of a love purely spiritual, to be realised in its fulness only after death, spirit with spirit, but yet to be kept as the master of daily life, to whose law all thought and action are referred. The thought is noble, the expression of it simple, fine, and clear. It is, moreover, close to truth—there are hundreds of men who live quietly in love of that kind, and die in its embrace.

In *Cristina* the love is just as spiritual, but the motive of the poem is not one, as in *Evelyn Hope*, but two. The woman is not dead, and she has missed her chance. But the lover has not. He has seen her and in a moment loved her. She also looked on him and felt her soul matched by him as they "rushed together." But the world carried her away and she lost the fulness of life. He, on the contrary, kept the moment for ever, and with it, her and all she might have been with him.

Her soul's mine    and thus grown perfect  
I shall pass my life's remainder

This is not the usual Love-poem. It is a love as spiritual, as mystic, even more mystic, since the woman lives, than the lover felt for *Evelyn Hope*.

The second motive in *Cristina* of the lover who meets the true partner of his soul or hers, and either seizes the happy hour and possesses joy for ever, or misses it and loses all, is a favourite with Browning. He repeats it frequently under diverse circumstances, for it opened out so many various endings, and afforded so much opportunity for his

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beloved analysis. Moreover, optimist as he was in his final thought of man, he was deeply conscious of the ironies of life, of the ease with which things go wrong, of the impossibility of setting them right from without. And in the matter of love he marks in at least four poems how the moment was held and life was therefore conquest. Then in *Youth and Art*, in *Dis Aliter Visum*, in *Bifurcation*, in *The Lost Mistress*, and in *Too Late*, he records the opposite fate, and in characters so distinct that the repetition of the motive is not monotonous. These are studies of the Might-have-beens of love.

Another motive, used with varied circumstance in three or four poems, but fully expanded in *James Lee's Wife*, is the discovery, after years of love, that love on one side is lost irretrievably. Another motive is, that rather than lose love men or women will often sacrifice their conscience, their reason, or their liberty. This sacrifice, of all that makes our nobler being for the sake of personal love alone, brings with it, because the whole being is degraded, the degradation, decay, and death of personal love itself.

Another set of poems describes with fanciful charm, sometimes with happy gaiety, love at play with itself. True love makes in the soul an unfathomable ocean in whose depths are the imaginations of love, serious, infinite, and divine. But on its surface the light of jewelled fancies plays—a thousand thousand sunny memories and hopes, flying thoughts and dancing feelings. A poet would

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be certain to have often seen this happy crowd, and to desire to trick them out in song. So Browning does in his poem, *In a Gondola*. The two lovers, with the dark shadow of fate brooding over them, sing and muse and speak alternately, imaging in swift and rival pictures made by fancy their deep-set love; playing with its changes, creating new worlds in which to place it, but always returning to its isolated individuality; recalling how it began, the room where it reached its aim, the pictures, the furniture, the balcony, her dress, all the scenery, in a hundred happy and glancing pictures; while interlaced through their gaiety--and the gaiety made keener by the nearness of dark fate--is coming death, death well purchased by an hour of love. Finally, the lover is stabbed and slain, and the pity of it throws back over the sunshine of love's fancies a cloud of tears. This is the stuff of life that Browning loved to paint--interwoven darkness and brightness, sorrow and joy trembling each on the edge of the other, life playing at ball, as joyous as Nausicaa and her maids, on a thin crust over a gulf of death.

Just such another poem--of the sportiveness of love, only this time in memory, not in present pleasure, is to be found in *A Lovers' Quarrel*, and the quarrel is the dark element in it. Browning always feels that mighty passion has its root in tragedy, and that it seeks relief in comedy. The lover sits by the fireside alone, and recalls, forgetting pain for a moment, the joyful play they two had together, when love expressed its depth of

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pleasure in dramatic fancies. Every separate picture is done in Browning's impressionist way. And when the glad memories are over, and the sorrow returns, passion leaps out—

It is twelve o'clock  
I shall hear her knock  
In the worst of a storm's uproar,  
I shall pull her through the door,  
I shall have her for evermore!

This is partly a study of the memory of love; and Browning has represented, without any sorrow linked to it, memorial love in a variety of characters under different circumstances, so that, though the subject is the same, the treatment varies. A charming instance of this is *The Flower's Name*; easy to read, happy in its fancy, in its scenery, in the subtle play of deep affection, in the character of its lover, in the character of the girl who is remembered—a good example of Browning's power to image in a few verses two human souls so clearly that they live in our world for ever. *Meeting at Night*—*Parting at Morning* is another reminiscence, mixed up with the natural scenery of the meeting and parting, a vivid recollection of a fleeting night of passion, and then the abandonment of its isolation for a wider, fuller life with humanity. I quote it for the fine impassioned way in which human feeling and natural scenery are fused together.

### MEETING AT NIGHT.

The grey sea and the long black land;  
And the yellow half-moon large and low

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And the startled little waves that leap  
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,  
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,  
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach ;  
Three fields to cross till a farm appears ;  
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch  
And blue spurt of a lighted match,  
And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears,  
Than the two hearts beating each to each !

### PARTING AT MORNING.

Round the cape of a sudden came the sea,  
And the sun looked over the mountain's rim .  
And straight was a path of gold for him,  
And the need of a world of men for me.

The poem entitled *Confessions* is another of these memories, in which a dying man, careless of death, careless of the dull conventions of the clergyman, cares for nothing but the memory of his early passion for a girl one happy June, and dies in comfort of the sweetness of the memory, though he thinks—

How sad and bad and mad it was.

Few but Browning would have seen, and fewer still have recorded, this vital piece of truth. It represents a whole type of character—those who in a life of weary work keep their day of love, even when it has been wrong, as their one poetic, ideal possession, and cherish it for ever. The wrong of it disappears in the ideal beauty which now has gathered round it, and as it was faithful, unmixed with other love, it escapes degradation. We see, when the man images the past and its scenery out

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of the bottles of physic on the table, how the material world had been idealised to him all his life long by this passionate memory—

Do I view the world as a vale of tears ?  
Ah, reverend sir, not I.

It might be well to compare with this another treatment of the memory of love in *St. Martin's Summer*. A much less interesting and natural motive rules it than *Confessions* ; and the characters, though more "in society" than the dying man, are grosser in nature ; gross by their inability to love, or by loving freshly to make a new world in which the old sorrow dies or is transformed. There is no humour in the thing, though there is bitter irony. But there is humour in an earlier poem—*A Serenade at the Villa*, where, in the last verse, the bitterness of wrath and love together (a very different bitterness from that of *St. Martin's Summer*), breaks out, and is attributed to the garden gate. The night-watch and the singing is over ; she must have heard him, but she gave no sign. He wonders what she thought, and then, because he was only half in love, flings away—

Oh how dark your villa was,  
Windows fast and obdurate !  
How the garden grudged me grass  
Where I stood—the iron gate  
Ground its teeth to let me pass !

It is impossible to notice all these studies of love, but they form, together, a book of transient phases of the passion in almost every class of

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society. And they show how Browning, passing through the world, from the Quartier Latin to London drawing-rooms, was continually on the watch to catch, store up, and reproduce a crowd of motives for poetry which his memory held and his imagination shaped.

There is only one more poem, which I cannot pass by in this group of studies. It is one of sacred and personal memory, so much so that it is probable the loss of his life lies beneath it. It rises into that highest poetry which fuses together into one form a hundred thoughts and a hundred emotions, and which is only obscure from the mingling of their multitude. I quote it, I cannot comment on it.

Never the time and the place  
And the loved one all together !  
This path—how soft to pace !  
This May—what magic weather !  
Where is the loved one's face ?  
In a dream that loved one's face meets mine  
But the house is narrow, the place is bleak  
Where, outside, rain and wind combine  
With a furtive ear, if I strive to speak,  
With a hostile eye at my flushing cheek,  
With a malice that marks each word, each sign !  
O enemy sly and serpentine,  
Uncoil thee from the waking man !  
Do I hold the Past  
Thus firm and fast  
Yet doubt if the Future hold I can ?  
This path so soft to pace shall lead  
Through the magic of May to herself indeed !  
Or narrow if needs the house must be,  
Outside are the storms and strangers :  
Oh, close, safe, warm sleep I and she,  
—I and she !

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That, indeed, is passionate enough.

Then there is another group—tales which embody phases of love. *Count Gismond* is one of these. It is too long, and wants Browning's usual force. The outline of the story was, perhaps, too simple to interest his intellect, and he needed in writing poetry not only the emotional subject, but that there should be something in or behind the emotion through the mazes of which his intelligence might glide like a serpent.\*

*The Glove* is another of these tales—a good example of the brilliant fashion in which Browning could, by a strange kaleidoscopic turn of his subject, give it a new aspect and a new calling. The world has had the tale before it for a very long time. Every one had said the woman was wrong and the man right; but here, poetic juggler as he is, Browning makes the woman right and the man wrong, reversing the judgment of centuries. The best of it is he seems to hold the truth of the thing. It is amusing to think that only now, in the other world, if she and Browning meet, will she find herself comprehended.

Finally, as to the mightier kinds of love, those supreme forms of the passion, which have neither beginning nor end; to which time and space are but names; which make and fill the universe; the

\* There is one simple story at least which he tells quite admirably, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*. But then, that story, if it is not troubled by intellectual matter, is also not troubled by any deep emotion. It is told by a poet who becomes a child for children.



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least grain of which predicates the whole ; the spirit of which is God Himself ; the breath of whose life is immortal joy, or sorrow which means joy ; whose vision is Beauty, and whose activity is Creation—these, united in God, or divided among men into their three great entities—love of ideas for their truth and beauty ; love of the natural universe, which is God's garment ; love of humanity, which is God's child—these pervade the whole of Browning's poetry as the heat of the sun pervades the earth and every little grain upon it. They make its warmth and life, strength and beauty. They are too vast to be circumscribed in a lyric, represented in a drama, bound up even in a long story of spiritual endeavour like *Paracelsus*. But they move, in dignity, splendour and passion, through all that he deeply conceived and nobly wrought ; and their triumph and immortality in his poetry are never for one moment clouded with doubt or subject to death. This is the supreme thing in his work. To him Love is the Conqueror, and Love is God.

## CHAPTER X

### THE PASSIONS OTHER THAN LOVE

THE poems on which I have dwelt in the last chapter, though they are mainly concerned with love between the sexes, illustrate the other noble passions, all of which, such as joy, are forms of, or rather children of, self-forgetful love. They do not illustrate the evil or ignoble passions—envy, jealousy, hatred, base fear, despair, revenge, avarice and remorse—which, driven by the emotion that so fiercely and swiftly accumulates around them, master the body and soul, the intellect and the will, like some furious tyrant, and in their extremes hurry their victim into madness. Browning took some of these terrible powers and made them subjects in his poetry. Short, sharp-outlined sketches of them occur in his dramas and longer poems. There is no closer image in literature of long suppressed fear breaking out into its agony of despair than in the lines which seal Guido's pleading in *The Ring and the Book*.

Life is all !

I was just stark mad,—let the madman live  
Pressed by as many chains as you please pile !  
Don't open ! Hold me from them ! I am yours,  
I am the Grand Duke's—no, I am the Pope's !  
Abate,—Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God, . . .  
Pompilia, will you let them murder me ?

But there is no elaborate, long-continued study of these sordid and evil things in Browning. • He

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was not one of our modern realists who love to paddle and splash in the sewers of humanity. Not only was he too healthy in mind to dwell on them, but he justly held them as not fit subjects for art unless they were bound up with some form of pity, as jealousy and envy are in Shakespeare's treatment of the story of Othello ; or imaged along with so much of historic scenery that we lose in our interest in the decoration some of the hatefulness of the passion. The combination, for example, of envy and hatred resolved on vengeance in *The Laboratory* is too intense for any pity to intrude, but Browning realises not only the evil passions in the woman but the historical period also and its temper ; and he fills the poem with scenery which, though it leaves the woman first in our eyes, yet lessens the malignant element. The same, but of course with the difference Browning's variety creates, may be said of the story of the envious king, where envy crawls into hatred, hatred almost motiveless—the *Instans Tyrannus*. A faint vein of humour runs through it. The king describes what has been ; his hatred has passed. He sees how small and fanciful it was, and the illustrations he uses to express it tell us that ; though they carry with them also the contemptuous intensity of his past hatred. The swell of the hatred remains, though the hatred is past. So we are not left face to face with absolute evil, with the corruption hate engenders in the soul. God has intervened, and the worst of it has passed away.

Then there is the study of hatred in the *Soliloquy*

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*of the Spanish Cloister.* The hatred is black and deadly, the instinctive hatred of a brutal nature for a delicate one, which, were it unrelieved, would be too vile for the art of poetry. But it is relieved, not only by the scenery, the sketch of the monks in the refectory, the garden of flowers, the naughty girls seated on the convent bank washing their black hair, but also by the admirable humour which ripples like laughter through the hopes of his hatred, and by the brilliant sketching of the two men. We see them, know them, down to their little tricks at dinner, and we end by realising hatred, it is true, but in too agreeable a fashion for just distress.

In other poems of the evil passions the relieving element is pity. There are the two poems entitled *Before* and *After*, that is, before and after the duel. *Before* is the statement of one of the seconds, with curious side-thoughts introduced by Browning's mental play with the subject, that the duel is absolutely necessary. The challenger has been deeply wronged ; and he cannot and will not let forgiveness intermit his vengeance. The man in us agrees with that ; the Christian in us says, " Forgive, let God do the judgment." But the passion for revenge has here its way and the guilty falls. And now let Browning speak—Forgiveness is right and the vengeance-fury wrong. The dead man has escaped, the living has not escaped the wrath of conscience ; pity is all.

Take the cloak from his face and at first  
Let the corpse do its worst !

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How he lies in his rights of a man !  
Death has done all death can.  
And, absorbed in the new life he leads,  
He recks not, he heeds

Nor his wrong nor my vengeance ; both strike  
On his senses alike,  
And are lost in the solemn and strange  
Surprise of the change.

Ha, what avails death to erase  
His offence, my disgrace ?  
I would we were boys as of old  
In the field, by the fold .  
His outrage, God's patience, man's scorn  
Were so easily borne !

I stand here now, he lies in his place ,  
Cover the face

Again, there are few studies in literature of contempt, hatred and revenge more sustained and subtle than Browning's poem entitled *A Forgiveness* ; and the title marks how, though the justice of revenge was accomplished on the woman, yet that pity, even love for her, accompanied and followed the revenge. Our natural revolt against the cold-blooded work of hatred is modified, when we see the man's heart and the woman's soul, into pity for their fate. The man tells his story to a monk in the confessional, who has been the lover of his wife. He is a statesman absorbed in his work, yet he feels that his wife makes his home a heaven, and he carries her presence with him all the day. His wife takes the first lover she meets, and, discovered, tells her husband that she hates him. " Kill me now," she cries. But he despises her too much to hate her ; she is not worth killing.

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Three years they live together in that fashion, till one evening she tells him the truth. "I was jealous of your work. I took my revenge by taking a lover, but I loved you, you only, all the time, and lost you—

I thought you gave  
Your heart and soul away from me to slave  
At statecraft Since my right in you seemed lost,  
I stung myself to teach you, to your cost,  
What you rejected could be prized beyond  
Life, heaven, by the first fool I threw a fond  
Look on, a fatal word to,

"Ah, is that true, you loved and still love?  
Then contempt perishes, and hate takes its place.  
Write your confession, and die by my hand.  
Vengeance is foreign to contempt, you have risen to  
the level at which hate can act. I pardon you, for  
as I slay hate departs—and now, sir," and he turns  
to the monk—

She sleeps, as erst  
Beloved, in this your church ay, yours!

and drives the poisoned dagger through the grate  
of the confessional into the heart of her lover.

This is Browning's closest study of hate, contempt, and revenge. But bitter and close as it is, what is left with us is pity for humanity, pity for the woman, pity for the lover, pity for the husband.

Again, in the case of Sebald and Ottima in *Pippa Passes*, pity also rules. Love passing into lust has led to hate, and these two have slaked their hate and murdered Luca, Ottima's husband. They lean out of the window of the shrub-house as

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the morning breaks. For the moment their false love is supreme. Their crime only creeps like a snake, half asleep, about the bottom of their hearts; they recall their early passion and try to brazen it forth in the face of their murder, which now rises dreadful and more dreadful, into threatening life in their soul. They reanimate their hate of Luca to lower their remorse, but at every instant his blood stains their speech. At last, while Ottima loves on, Sebald's dark horror turns to hatred of her he loved, till she lures him back into desire of her again. The momentary lust cannot last, but Browning shoots it into prominence that the outburst of horror and repentance may be the greater.

I kiss you now dear Ottima now and now !  
This way ? Will you forgive me be once more  
My great queen ?

At that moment Pippa passes by, singing

The years at the spring  
And days at the morn  
Mornings at seven  
The hill sides dew pearled  
The larks on the wing  
The snails on the thorn  
God's in his heaven  
All's right with the world !

Something in it smites Sebald's heart like a hammer of God. He repents, but in the cowardice of repentance curses her. That baseness I do not think Browning should have introduced, no, nor certain carnal phrases which, previously right, now

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jar with the spiritual passion of repentance. But his fury with her passes away into the passion of despair—

My brain is drowned now—quite drowned all I feel  
Is is, at swift recurring intervals,  
A hurry-down within me, as of waters  
Loosened to smother up some ghastly pit  
There they go—whirls from a black fiery sea !

lines which must have been suggested to Browning by verses, briefer and more intense, in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*. Even Ottima, lifted by her love, which purifies itself in wishing to die for her lover, repents.

Not me to him O God be merciful !

Thus into this cauldron of sin Browning steals the pity of God. We know they will be saved, so as by fire.

Then there is the poem on the story of *Cristina and Monaldeschi*, a subject too odious, I think, to be treated lyrically. It is a tale of love turned to hatred, and for good cause, and of the pitiless vengeance which followed. Browning has not succeeded in it, and it may be so because he could get no pity into it. The Queen had none, Monaldeschi deserved none—a coward, a fool, and a traitor ! Nevertheless, more might have been made of it by Browning. The poem is obscure and wandering, and the effort he makes to grip the subject reveals nothing but the weakness of the grip. It ought not to have been published.



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And now I turn to passions more delightful, that this chapter may close in light and not in darkness—passions of the imagination, of the romantic regions of the soul. There is, first, the longing for the mystic world, the world beneath appearance, with or without reference to eternity. Secondly, bound up with that, there is the longing for the unknown, for following the gleam which seems to lead us onward, but we know not where. Then, there is the desire, the deeper for its constant suppression, for escape from the prison of a worldly society, from its conventions and maxims of morality, its barriers of custom and rule, into liberty and unchartered life. Lastly, there is that longing to discover and enjoy the lands of adventure and romance which underlies and wells upwards through so much of modern life, and which has never ceased to send its waters up to refresh the world. These are romantic passions. On the whole, Browning does not often touch them in their earthly activities. His highest romance was beyond this world. It claimed eternity, and death was the entrance into its enchanted realm. When he did bring romantic feeling into human life, it was for the most part in the hunger and thirst, which, as in *Abt Vogler*, urged men beyond the visible into the invisible. But now and again he touched the Romantic of Earth. *Childe Roland*, *The Flight of the Duchess*, and some others, are alive with the romantic spirit.

But before I write of these, there are a few lyrical poems, written in the freshness of his youth,

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which are steeped in the light of the story-telling world ; and might be made by one who, in the morning of imagination, sat on the dewy hulls of the childish world. They are full of unusual melody, and are simple and wise enough to be sung by girls knitting in the sunshine while their lovers bend above them. One of these, a beautiful thing, with that touch of dark fate at its close which is so common in folk-stories, is hidden away in *Paracelsus*. "Over the sea," it begins :

Over the sea our galleys went,  
With cleaving prow, in order brave  
To a speeding wind and a bounding wave,  
A gallant armament -  
Each bark built out of a forest tree  
Left leafy and rough as first it grew,  
And nailed all over the gaping sides,  
Within and without, with black bull hides,  
Seethed in fat, and supplied with flame,  
To beu the playful billows' game

It is made in a happy melody, and the curious mingling in the tale, as it continues, of the rudest ships, as described above, with purple hangings, cedar tents, and noble statues,

A hundred shapes of hard stone,

and with gentle islanders from Græcian seas is characteristic of certain folk-tales, especially those of Gascony. That it is spoken by *Paracelsus* as a parable of the state of mind he has reached, in which he clings to his first fault with haughty and foolish resolution, scarcely lessens the romantic element in it. That is so strong that we forget that it is meant as a parable.

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There is another song, which touches the edge of romance, in which Paracelsus describes how he will bury in sweetness the ideal aims he had in youth, building a pyre for them of all perfumed things ; and the last lines of the verse I quote leave us in a castle of old romance—

And strew faint sweetness from some old  
Egyptian's fine worm-eaten shroud  
Which breaks to dust when once unrolled ,  
Or shredded perfume, like a cloud  
From closet long to quiet vowed,  
With moth and dropping arras hung,  
Mouldering her lute and books among  
As when a queen, long dead, was young

The other is a song, more than a song, in *Pippa Passes*, a true piece of early folk-romance, with a faint touch of Greek story, wedded to Eastern and mediæval elements, in its roving imaginations. It is admirably pictorial, and the air which broods over it is the sunny and still air which, in men's fancy, was breathed by the happy children of the Golden Age. I quote a great part of it

A King lived long ago,  
In the morning of the world  
When earth was nigher heaven than now .  
And the King's locks curled  
Disparting o'er a forehead full  
As the milk-white space 'twixt horn and horn  
Of some sacrificial bull—  
Only calm as a babe new-born .  
For he was got to a sleepy mood,  
So safe from all decrepitude,  
Age with its bane so sure gone by,  
(The gods so loved him while he dreamed)  
That living lived thus long, there seemed  
No need the King should ever die

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LUIGI. No need that sort of King should ever die !

Among the rocks his city was .  
Before his palace, in the sun,  
He sat to see his people pass,  
And judge them every one  
From its threshold of smooth stone  
They haled him many a valley-thief  
Caught in the sheep-pens, robber chief  
Swarthy and shameless beggar, cheat,  
Spy-prowler, or rough pirate found  
On the sea-sand left aground ,

These, all and every one,  
The King judged sitting in the sun

LUIGI. That King should still judge sitting in the sun !

His councillors, on left and right,  
Looked anxious up,—but no surprise  
Disturbed the King's old smiling eyes  
Where the very blue had turned to white  
'Tis said, a Python scared one day  
The breathless city till he came  
With forked tongue and eyes on flame,  
Where the old King sat to judge away ,  
But when he saw the sweepy hair  
Girt with a crown of berries rare  
Which the god will hardly give to wear  
To the maiden who singeth, dancing bare  
In the altar-smoke by the pine torch lights,  
At his wondrous forest rites,—  
Seeing this, he did not dare  
Approach the threshold in the sun  
Assault the old King smiling there  
Such grace had kings when the world begun !

Then there are two other romantic pieces, not ringing with this early note, but having in them a wafting scent of the Provençal spirit. One is the song sung by Pippa when she passes the room where Jules and Phene are talking the song of

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Kate, the Queen. The other is the cry *Rudel*, the great troubadour, sent out of his heart to the Lady of Tripoli whom he never saw, but loved. The subject is romantic, but that, I think, is all the romance in it. It is not *Rudel* who speaks but Browning. It is not the twelfth but the nineteenth century which has made all that analysis and over-worked illustration.

There remain, on this matter, *Childe Roland* and the *Flight of the Duchess*. I believe that *Childe Roland* emerged, all of a sudden and to Browning's surprise, out of the pure imagination, like the Sea-born Queen; that Browning did not conceive it beforehand; that he had no intention in it, no reason for writing it, and no didactic or moral aim in it. It was not even born of his will. Nor does he seem to be acquainted with the old story on the subject which took a ballad form in Northern England. The impulse to write it was suddenly awakened in him by that line out of an old song the Fool quotes in *King Lear*. There is another tag of a song in *Lear* which stirs a host of images in the imagination; and out of which some poet might create a romantic lyric:

Still through the hawthorn blows the cold wind.

But it does not produce so concrete a set of images as *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came*. Browning has made that his own, and what he has done is almost romantic. Almost romantic, I say, because the peculiarities of Browning's personal

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genius appear too strongly in *Childe Roland* for pure romantic story, in which the idiosyncrasy of the poet, the personal element of his fancy, are never dominant. The scenery, the images, the conduct of the tales of romance, on account of their long passage through the popular mind, are impersonal.

Moreover, Browning's poem is too much in the vague. The romantic tales are clear in outline; this is not. But the elements in the original story entered, as it were of their own accord, into Browning. There are several curious, unconscious reversions to folk-lore which have crept into his work like living things, which, seeing Browning engaged on a story of theirs, entered into it as into a house of their own, and without his knowledge. The wretched cripple who points the way; the blind and wicked horse; the accursed stream; the giant mountain range, all the peaks alive, as if in a nature myth; the crowd of Roland's predecessors turned to stone by their failure; the sudden revealing of the tower where no tower had been, might all be matched out of folk-stories. I think I have heard that Browning wrote the poem at a breath one morning; and it reads as if, from verse to verse, he did not know what was coming to his pen. This is very unlike his usual way; but it is very much the way in which tales of this kind are unconsciously up-built.

Men have tried to find in the poem an allegory of human life; but Browning had no allegorising intention. However, as every story which was

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ever written has at its root the main elements of human nature, it is always possible to make an allegory out of any one of them. If we like to amuse ourselves in that fashion, we may do so ; but we are too bold and bad if we impute allegory to Browning. *Childe Roland* is nothing more than a gallop over the moorlands of imagination ; and the skies of the soul, when it was made, were dark and threatening storm. But one thing is plain in it : it is an outcome of that passion for the mystical world, for adventure, for the unknown, which lies at the root of the romantic tree.

The *Flight of the Duchess* is full of the passion of escape from the conventional ; and nowhere is Browning more original or more the poet. Its manner is exactly right, exactly fitted to the character and condition of the narrator, who is the Duke's huntsman. Its metrical movement is excellent, and the changes of that movement are in harmony with the things and feelings described. It is astonishingly swift, alive, and leaping ; and it delays, as a stream, with great charm, when the emotion of the subject is quiet, recollective, or deep. The descriptions of Nature in the poem are some of the most vivid and true in Browning's work. The sketches of animal life—so natural on the lips of the teller of the story—are done from the keen observation of a huntsman, and with his love for the animals he has fed, followed and slain. And, through it all, there breathes the romantic passion—to be out of the world of custom and commonplace, set free to wander for ever to an

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unknown goal ; to drink the air of adventure and change ; not to know to-day what will take place to-morrow, only to know that it will be different ; to ride on the top of the wave of life as it runs before the wind ; to live with those who live, and are of the same mind ; to be loved and to find love the best good in the world ; to be the centre of hopes and joys among those who may blame and give pain, but who are never indifferent ; to have many troubles, but always to pursue their far-off good ; to wring the life out of them, and, at the last, to have a new life, joy and freedom in another and a fairer world. But let Browning tell the end :

So, at the last shall come old age,  
Decrepit as befits that stage ;  
How else would'st thou retire apart  
With the hoarded memories of thy heart,  
And gather all to the very least  
Of the fragments of life's earlier feast,  
Let fall through eagerness to find  
The crowning dainties yet behind ?  
Ponder on the entire past  
Laid together thus at last,  
When the twilight helps to fuse  
The first fresh with the faded hues,  
And the outline of the whole  
Grandly fronts for once thy soul.  
And then as, 'mid the dark, a gleam  
Of yet another morning breaks,  
And, like the hand which ends a dream,  
Death, with the might of his sunbeam,  
Touches the flesh, and the soul awakes,  
Ther.——

Then the romance of life sweeps into the world beyond. But even in that world the duchess will never settle down to a fixed life. She will be, like



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some of us, a child of the wandering tribes of eternity.

This romantic passion which never dies even in our modern society, is embodied in the gipsy crone who, in rags and scarcely clinging to life, suddenly lifts into youth and queenliness, just as in a society, where romance seems old or dead, it springs into fresh and lovely life. This is the heart of the poem, and it is made to beat the more quickly by the wretched attempt of the duke and his mother to bring back the observances of the Middle Ages without their soul. Nor even then does Browning learn his motive. The huntsman has heard the gipsy's song; he has seen the light on his mistress' face as she rode away—the light which is not from sun or star—and the love of the romantic world is born in him. He will not leave his master; there his duty lies. "I must see this fellow his sad life through." But then he will go over the mountains, after his lady, leaving the graves of his wife and children, into the unknown, to find her, or news of her, in the land of the wanderers. And if he never find her, if, after pleasant journeying, earth cannot give her to his eyes, he will still pursue his quest in a world where romance and formality are not married together.

So I shall find out some snug corner,  
Under a hedge, like Orson the wood-knight,  
Turn myself round and bid the world Good Night;  
And sleep a sound sleep till the trumpet's blowing  
Wakes me (unless priests cheat us laymen)  
To a world where will be no further throwing  
Pearls before swine that can't value them. Amen.

## CHAPTER XI

### IMAGINATIVE REPRESENTATIONS

ALL poems might be called "imaginative representations." But the class of poems in Browning's work to which I give that name stands apart. It includes such poems as *Cleon*, *Caliban on Setebos*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, the *Epistle of Karshish*, and they isolate themselves, not only in Browning's poetry, but in English poetry. They have some resemblance in aim and method to the monologues of Tennyson, such as the *Northern Farmer* or *Rizpah*, but their aim is much wider than Tennyson's, and their method far more elaborate and complex.

What do they represent? To answer this is to define within what limits I give them the name of "imaginative representations." They are not only separate studies of individual men as they breathed and spoke; face, form, tricks of body recorded; intelligence, character, temper of mind, spiritual, aspiration made clear—Tennyson did that; they are also studies of these individual men—*Cleon*, *Karshish* and the rest—as general types, representative images, of the age in which they lived; or of the school of art to which they belonged;

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or of the crisis in theology, religion, art, or the social movement, which took place while the men they paint were alive, and which these men led, or formed, or followed. That is their main element, and it defines them.

They are not dramatic. Their action and ideas are confined to one person, and their circumstance and scenery to one time and place. But Browning unlike Tennyson, filled the background of the stage on which he placed his single figure with a multitude of objects, or animals, or natural scenery, or figures standing round or in motion; and these give additional vitality and interest to the representation. Again, they are short, as short as a soliloquy or a letter or a conversation in a street. Shortness belongs to this form of poetic work—a form to which Browning gave a singular intensity. It follows that they must not be argumentative beyond what is fitting. Nor ought they to glide into the support of a thesis, or into didactic addresses, as *Bishop Blougram* and *Mr. Sludge* do. These might be called treatises, and are apart from the kind of poem of which I speak. They begin, indeed, within its limits, but they soon transgress those limits, and are more properly classed with poems which, also representative, have not the brevity, the scenery, the lucidity, the objective representation, the concentration of the age into one man's mind, which mark out these poems from the rest, and isolate them into a class of their own.

The voice we hear in them is rarely the voice of

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Browning ; nor is the mind of their personages his mind, save so far as he is their creator. There are a few exceptions to this, but, on the whole, Browning has, in writing these poems, stripped himself of his own personality. He had, by creative power, made these men ; cast them off from himself, and put them into their own age. They talk their minds out in character with their age. Browning seems to watch them, and to wonder how they got out of his hands and became men. That is the impression they make, and it predicates a singular power of imagination. Like the Prometheus of Goethe, the poet sits apart, moulding men and then endowing them with life. But he cannot tell, any more than Prometheus, what they will say and do after he has made them. He does tell, of course, but that is not our impression. Our impression is that they live and talk of their own accord, so vitally at home they are in the country, the scenery, and the thinking of the place and time in which he has imagined them.

Great knowledge seems required for this, and Browning had indeed an extensive knowledge not so much of the historical facts, as of the tendencies of thought which worked in the times wherein he placed his men. But the chief knowledge he had, through his curious reading, was of a multitude of small intimate details of the customs, clothing, architecture, dress, popular talk and scenery of the towns and country of Italy from the thirteenth century up to modern times. To every one of these details—such as are found in *Sordello*, in *Fra*

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*Lippo Lippi*, in the *Bishop orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church*—his vivid and grasping imagination gave an uncommon reality.

But even without great knowledge such poems may be written, if the poet have imagination, and the power to execute in material words what has been imagined. *Theology in the Island* and the prologue to a *Death in the Desert* are examples of this. Browning knew nothing of that island in the undiscovered seas where Prosper dwelt, but he made all the scenery of it and all its animal life, and he re-created Caliban. He had never seen the cave in the desert where he placed John to die, nor the sweep of rocky hills and sand around it, nor the Bactrian waiting with the camels. Other poets, of course, have seen unknown lands and alien folks, but he has seen them more vividly, more briefly, more forcibly. His imagination was objective enough.

But it was as subjective as it was objective. He saw the soul of Fra Lippo Lippi and the soul of his time as vividly as he saw the streets of Florence at night, the watch, the laughing girls, and the palace of the Medici round the corner. It was a remarkable combination, and it is by this combination of the subjective and objective imagination that he draws into some dim approach to Shakespeare; and nowhere closer than in these poems.

Again, not only the main character of each of these poems, but all the figures introduced (sometimes only in a single line) to fill up the background, are sketched with as true and vigorous a

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pencil as the main figure; are never out of place or harmony with the whole, and are justly subordinated. The young men who stand round the Bishop's bed when he orders his tomb, the watchmen in *Fra Lippo Lippi*, the group of St. John's disciples, are as alive, and as much in tune with the whole, as the servants and tenants of Justice Shallow. Again, it is not only the lesser figures, but the scenery of these poems which is worth our study. That also is closely fitted to the main subject. The imagination paints it for that, and nothing else. It would not fit any other subject. For imagination, working at white heat, cannot do what is out of harmony; no more than a great musician can introduce a false chord. All goes together in these poems—scenery, characters, time, place and action.

Then, also, the extent of their range is remarkable. Their subjects begin with savage man making his god out of himself. They pass through Greek mythology to early Christian times; from Artemis and Pan to St. John dying in the desert. Then, still in the same period, while Paul was yet alive, he paints another aspect of the time in Cleon the rich artist, the friend of kings, who had reached the top of life, included all the arts in himself, yet dimly craved for more than earth could give. From these times the poems pass on to the early and late Renaissance, and from that to the struggle for freedom in Italy, and from that to modern life in Europe. This great range illustrates the penetration and the versatility of his genius. He could

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place us with ease and truth at Corinth, Athens or Rome, in Paris, Vienna or London ; and wherever we go with him we are at home.

One word more must be said about the way a great number of these poems arose. They leaped up in his imagination full-clad and finished, at a single touch from the outside (*Caliban upon Setebos* took its rise from a text in the Bible which darted into his mind as he read the *Tempest* *Cleon* arose as he read that verse in St. Paul's speech at Athens, "As certain also of your own poets have said." I fancy that *An Epistle of Karshish* was born one day when he read those two stanzas in *In Memoriam* about Lazarus, and imagined how the subject would come to him *Fra Lippo Lippi* slipped into his mind one day at the Belle Arti at Florence as he stood before the picture described in the poem and walked afterwards at night through the streets of Florence. These fine things are born in a moment, and come into our world from poet, painter and musician, full-grown, built, like Aladdin's palace, with all their jewels, in a single night. They are inexplicable by any scientific explanation, as inexplicable as genius itself. When have the hereditarians explained Shakespeare, Mozart, Turner ? When has the science of the world explained the birth of a lyric of Burns, a song of Beethoven's, or a drawing of Raffæle ? Let these gentlemen veil their eyes, and confess their inability to explain the facts. For it is fact they touch. "Full fathom five thy father lies"—that song of Shakespeare exists. The

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overture to Don Giovanni is a reality. We can see the Bacchus and Ariadne at the National Gallery and the Theseus at the Museum. These are facts, but they are a million million miles beyond the grasp of any science. Nay, the very smallest things of their kind, the slightest water-colour sketch of Turner, a half-finished clay sketch of Donatello, the little song done in the corner of a provincial paper by a working clerk in a true poetic hour, are not to be fathomed by the most far-descending plummet of the scientific understanding. These things are in that super-physical world into which, however closely he saw and dealt with his characters in the world of the senses, the conscience, or the understanding, Browning led them all at last.

The first of these poems is *Natural Theology on the Island ; or, Caliban upon Setebos*. Caliban, with the instincts and intelligence of an early savage has, in an hour of holiday, set himself to conceive what Setebos, his mother's god, is like in character. He talks out the question with himself, and because he is in a vague fear lest Setebos, hearing him soliloquise about him, should feel insulted and swing a thunder-bolt at him, he not only hides himself in the earth, but speaks in the third person, as if it was not he that spoke, hoping in that fashion to trick his God.

Browning conceiving in himself the mind and temper of an honest, earthly, imaginative savage—who is developed far enough to build nature-myths in their coarse early forms—architectures the character of Setebos out of the habits, caprices,



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fancies, likes and dislikes, and thoughts of Caliban ; and an excellent piece of penetrative imagination it is. Browning has done nothing better, though he has done as well.

But Browning's Caliban is not a single personage. No one savage, at no one time, would have all these thoughts of his God. He is the representative of what has been thought, during centuries, by many thousands of men ; the concentration into one mind of the ground-thoughts of early theology. At one point, as if Browning wished to sketch the beginning of a new theological period, Caliban represents a more advanced thought than savage man conceives. This is Caliban's imagination of a higher being than Setebos who is the capricious creator and power of the earth—of the " Quiet," who is master of Setebos and whose temper is quite different ; who also made the stars, things which Caliban, with a touch of Browning's subtle thought, separates from the sun and moon and earth. It is plain from this, and from the whole argument which is admirably conducted, that Caliban is an intellectual personage, too long neglected ; and Prospero, could he have understood his nature, would have enjoyed his conversation. Renan agreed with Browning in this estimate of his intelligence, and made him the foundation of a philosophical play.

There is some slight reason for this in Shakespeare's invention. He lifts Caliban in intellect, even in feeling, far above Trinculo, Stephano, the Boatswain and the rest of the common men. The

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objection, however, has been made that Browning makes him too intelligent. The answer is that Browning is not drawing Caliban only, but embodying in an imagined personage the thoughts about God likely to be invented by early man during thousands of years—and thus accounts for the insequences of Caliban's thinking. They are not the thoughts of one but of several men. Yet a certain poetic unity is given to them by the unity of place. The continual introduction of the landscape to be seen from his refuge knits the discursive thinking of the savage into a kind of unity. We watch him lying in the thick water-slime of the hollow, his head on the rim of it propped by his hands, under the cave's mouth, hidden by the girding gourds and vines; looking out to sea and watching the wild animals that pass him by—and out of this place he does not stir.

In Shakespeare's *Tempest* Caliban is the gross, brutal element of the earth and is opposed to Ariel, the light, swift, fine element of the air. Caliban curses Prospero with the evils of the earth, with the wicked dew of the fen and the red plague of the sea-marsh. Browning's Caliban does not curse at all. When he is not angered, or in a caprice, he is a good-natured creature, full of animal enjoyment. He loves to lie in the cool slush, like a lizard, shivering with earthly pleasure when his spine is tickled by the small elf-things that course along it,

Run in and out each arm, and make him laugh.

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The poem is full of these good, close, vivid realisations of the brown prolific earth.

Browning had his own sympathy with Caliban. Nor does Shakespeare make him altogether brutish. He has been so educated by his close contact with nature that his imagination has been kindled. His very cursing is imaginative

As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed  
With raven's feather from unwholesome fen  
Drop on you both a south west blow on you  
And blister you all o'er

Stephano and Trinculo vulgar products of civilisation, could never have said that. Moreover, Shakespeare's Caliban, like Browning's, has the poetry of the earth-man in him. When Ariel plays, Trinculo and Stephano think it must be the devil, and Trinculo is afraid but Caliban loves and enjoys the music for itself

Be not afraid the isle is full of noises  
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears and sometimes voices  
That, if I then had waked after long sleep  
Will make me sleep again

Stephano answers, like a modern millionaire

This will prove a brave kingdom for me where I shall  
have my music for nothing

Browning's Caliban is also something of a poet, and loves the Nature of whom he is a child. We are not surprised when he

looks out o'er yon sea which sunbeams cross  
And regress till they weave a spider web  
(Meshes of fire some great fish breaks at times)

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though the phrase is full of a poet's imagination, for so the living earth would see and feel the sea. It belongs also to Caliban's nearness to the earth that he should have the keenest of eyes for animals, and that poetic pleasure in watching their life which, having seen them vividly, could describe them vividly. I quote one example from the poem; there are many others

'Thinketh He made therat the sun this isle  
Trees and the fowls here beest and creeping thing  
Yon otter sleek wet black lithe as a leech  
Yon auk one fire eye in a ball of foam  
That floats and feeds a certain bul, or brown  
He hath watched hunt with that fant white wedge eye  
By moonlight and the pie with the long tongue  
That pricks deep into oakswards for a worm  
And says a plun word when she finds her prize  
But will not eat the ants the ants themselves  
That build a wall of seeds and settled stalks  
About their hole

There are two more remarks to make about this poem. First, that Browning makes Caliban create a dramatic world, in which Miranda, Ariel, and he himself play their parts, and in which he assumes the part of Prosper. That is, Caliban invents a new world out of the persons he knows, but different from them, and a second self outside himself. No lower animal has ever conceived of such a creation. Secondly, Browning makes Caliban, in order to exercise his wit and his sense of what is beautiful, fall to making something—a bird, an insect, or a building which he ornaments, which satisfies him for a time, and which he then

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destroys to make a better. This is art in its beginning ; and the highest animal we know of is incapable of it. We know that the men of the caves were capable of it. When they made a drawing, a piece of carving, they were unsatisfied until they had made a better. When they made a story out of what they knew and saw, they went on to make more. Creation, invention, art—thus, independent entirely of the religious desire, makes the infinite gulf which divides man from the highest animals.

I do not mean, in this book, to speak of the theology of Caliban, though the part of the poem which concerns the origin of sacrifice is well worth our attention. But the poem may be recommended to those theological persons who say there is no God ; and to that large class of professional theologians, whose idea of a capricious, jealous, suddenly-angered God, without any conscience except his sense of power to do as he pleases, is quite in harmony with Caliban's idea of Setebos.

The next of these " imaginative representations " is the poem called *Cleon*. Cleon is a rich and famous artist of the Grecian isles, alive while St. Paul was still making his missionary journeys, just at the time when the Græco-Roman culture had attained a height of refinement, but had lost originating power ; when it thought it had mastered all the means for a perfect life, but was, in reality, trembling in a deep dissatisfaction on the edge of its first descent into exhaustion. Then, as everything good had been done in the art of the past, cultivated men began to ask " Was there

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anything worth doing ? ” • “ Was life itself worth living ? ” ; questions never asked by those who are living. Or “ What is life in its perfection, and when shall we have it ? ” ; a question also not asked by those who live in the morning of a new æra, when the world—as in Elizabeth’s days, as in 1789, as perhaps it may be in a few years—is born afresh ; but which is asked continually in the years when a great movement of life has passed its culminating point and has begun to decline. Again and again the world has heard these questions ; in Cleon’s time, and when the Renaissance had spent its force, and at the end of the reign of Louis XIV., and before Elizabeth’s reign had closed, and about 1820 in England, and of late years also in our society. This is the temper and the time that Browning embodies in Cleon, who is the incarnation of a culture which is already feeling that life is going out of it.

Protus, the king, has written to him, and the poem is Cleon’s answer to the king. Browning takes care, as usual, to have his background of scenery quite clear and fair. It is a courtyard to Cleon’s house in one of the sprinkled isles—

Lily on lily, that o’erlace the sea,  
And laugh their pride when the light wave lisps  
“ Greece.”

I quote it ; it marks the man and the age of luxurious culture.

They give thy letter to me, even now ;  
read and seem as if I heard thee speak.

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The master of thy galley still unlades  
 Gift after gift ; they block my court at last  
 And pile themselves along its portico  
 Royal with sunset, like a thought of thee ;  
 And one white she-slave from the group dispersed  
 Of black and white slaves (like the chequer work  
 Pavement, at once my nation's work and gift,  
 Now covered with this settle-down of doves),  
 One lyric woman, in her crocus vest  
 Woven of sea-wools, with her two white hands  
 Commends to me the strainer and the cup  
 Thy lip hath bettered ere it blesses mine.

But he is more than luxurious. He desires the highest life, and he praises the king because he has acknowledged by his gifts the joy that Art gives to life ; and most of all he praises him, because he too aspires, building a mighty tower, not that men may look at it, but that he may gaze from its height on the sun, and think what higher he may attain. The tower is the symbol of the cry of the king's soul.

Then he answers the king's letter. " It is true, O king, I am poet, sculptor, painter, architect, philosopher, musician ; all arts are mine. Have I done as well as the great men of old ? No, but I have combined their excellences into one man, into myself.

" I have not chanted verse like Homer, no—  
 Nor swept string like Terpander—no—nor carved  
 And painted men like Phidias and his friend :  
 I am not great as they are, point by point.  
 But I have entered into sympathy  
 With these four, running these into one soul,  
 Who, separate, ignored each other's art.  
 Say, is it nothing that I know them all ? "

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" This, since the best in each art has already been done, was the only progress possible, and I have made it. It is not unworthy, king !

" Well, now thou askest, if having done this, ' I have not attained the very crown of life ; if I cannot now comfortably and fearlessly meet death ? ' I, Cleon, leave,' thou sayest, ' my life behind me in my poems, my pictures ; I am immortal in my work. What more can life desire ? "

It is the question so many are asking now, and it is the answer now given. What better immortality than in one's work left behind to move in men ? What more than this can life desire ? But Cleon does not agree with that. " If thou, O king, with the light now in thee, hadst looked at creation before man appeared, thou wouldst have said, ' All is perfect so far.' But questioned if anything more perfect in joy might be, thou wouldst have said, ' Yes ; a being may be made, unlike these who do not know the joy they have, who shall be conscious of himself, and know that he is happy. Then his life will be satisfied with daily joy.' " O king, thou wouldst have answered foolishly. The higher the soul climbs in joy the more it sees of joy, and when it sees the most, it perishes. Vast capabilities of joy open round it ; it craves for all it presages ; desire for more deepening with every attainment. And then the body intervenes. Age, sickness, decay, forbid attainment. Life is inadequate to joy. What have the gods done ? It cannot be their malice, no, nor carelessness ; but—to let us see means of joy, and



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only give us power to hold a cupful—is that to live? It is misery, and the more of joy my artist nature makes me capable of feeling, the deeper my misery.

“ But then, O king, thou sayest ‘ that I leave behind me works that will live ; works, too, which paint the joy of life.’ Yes, but to show what the joy of life is, is not to have it. If I carve the young Phœbus, am I therefore young ? I can write odes of the delight of love, but grown too grey to be beloved, can I have its delight ? That fair slave of yours, and the rower with the muscles all a ripple on his back who lowers the sail in the bay, can write no love odes nor can they paint the joy of love ; but they can have it —not I.”

The knowledge, he thinks, of what joy is, of all that life can give, which increases in the artist as his feebleness increases, makes his fate the deadlier. What is it to him that his works live ? He does not live. The hand of death grapples the throat of life at the moment when he sees most clearly its infinite possibilities. Decay paralyses his hand when he knows best how to use his tools. It is accomplished wretchedness.

I quote his outburst. It is in the soul of thousands who have no hope of a life to come.

“ But ” sayest thou—(and I marvel, I repeat, to find thee trip on such a mere word) “ what Thou writest, paintest, stays, that does not die : Sappho survives, because we sing her songs, And Æschylus, because we read his plays ! ”  
Why, if they live still, let them come and take Thy slave in my despite, drink from thy cup,

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Speak in my place ! " Thou diest while I survive ? "—  
Say rather that my fate is headlier still,  
In this, that every day my sense of joy  
Grows more acute my soul (intensified  
By power and insight) more enlarged, more keen ;  
While every day my hairs fall more and more,  
My hand shakes, and the heavy years increase—  
The horror quickening still from year to year,  
The consummation coming past escape  
When I shall know most, and yet least enjoy —  
When all my works wherein I prove my worth,  
Being present still to mock me in men's mouths,  
Alive still, in the praise of such as thou,  
I, I the feeling thinking acting man  
The man who loved his life so overmuch,  
Sleep in my urn It is so horrible  
I dare at times imagine to my need  
Some future state revealed to us by Zeus,  
Unlimited in capability  
For joy, as this is in desire of joy,  
—To seek which the joy hunger forces us  
That, stung by straitness of our life made strait  
On purpose to make prized the life at large —  
Freed by the throbbing impulse we call death,  
We burst there as the worm into the fly,  
Who while a worm still wants his wings But no !  
Zeus has not yet revealed it — and alas  
He must have done so, were it possible !

This is one only of Browning's statements of what he held to be the fierce necessity for another life. Without it, nothing is left for humanity, having arrived at full culture, knowledge, at educated love of beauty, at finished morality and unselfishness—nothing in the end but Cleon's cry—sorrowful, somewhat stern, yet gentle—to Protus

Live long and happy, and in that thought die,  
Glad for what was Farewell.

But for those who are not Cleon, and Protus, not

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kings in comfort or poets in luxury, who have had no gladness, what end—what is to be said of them?

I will not stay to speak of *A Death in the Desert*, which is another of these poems, because the most part of it is concerned with questions of modern theology. St. John awakes into clear consciousness just before his death in the cave where he lies tended by a few disciples. He foresees some of the doubts of this century and meets them as he can. The bulk of this poem, very interesting in its way, is Browning's exposition of his own belief, not an imaginative representation of what St. John actually would have said. It does not, therefore, come into my subject. What does come into it is the extraordinary naturalness and vitality of the description given by John's disciple of the place where they were, and the fate of his companions. This is invented in Browning's most excellent way. It could not be better done.

The next poem is the *Epistle of Karshish, the Arab Physician*, to his master, concerning his strange medical experience. The time is just before the last siege of Jerusalem, and Karshish, journeying through Jericho, and up the pass, stays for a few days at Bethany and meets Lazarus. His case amazes him, and though he thinks his interest in it unworthy of a man of science in comparison with the new herbs and new diseases he has discovered, yet he is carried away by it, and gives a full account of it to his master.

I do not think that Browning ever wrote a poem the writing of which he more enjoyed. The

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creation of Karshish suited his humour and his quaint play with recondite knowledge. He describes the physician till we see him alive and thinking, in body and soul. The creation of Lazarus is even a higher example of the imaginative power of Browning; and that it is shaped for us through the mind of Karshish, and in tune with it, makes the imaginative effort the more remarkable. Then the problem—how to express the condition of a man's body and soul, who, having for three days according to the story as Browning conceives it lived consciously in the eternal and perfect world, has come back to dwell in this world—was so difficult and so involved in metaphysical strangenesses, that it delighted him.

Of course, he carefully prepares his scenery to give a true semblance to the whole. Karshish comes up the flinty pass from Jericho; he is attacked by thieves twice and beaten, and the wild beasts endanger his path;

A black lynx snarled and pricked a tufted ear,  
Lust of my blood inflamed his yellow balls;  
I cried and threw my staff and he was gone,

and then, at the end of the pass, he met Lazarus. See how vividly the scenery is realised—

I crossed a ridge of short, sharp, broken hills  
Like an old lion's cheek-teeth. Out there came  
A moon made like a face with certain spots,  
Multiform, manifold and menacing;  
Then a wind rose behind me. So we met  
In this old sleepy town at unawares  
The man and I.

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And the weird evening, Karshish thinks, had something to do with the strange impression the man has made on him. Then we are placed in the dreamy village of Bethany. We hear of its elders, its diseases, its flowers, its herbs and gums, of the insects which may help medicine —

There is a spider here  
Weaves no web, watches on the ledge of tombs  
Sprinkled with mottles on an ash grey back,

and then, how the countryside is all on fire with news of Vespasian marching into Judæa. So we have the place, the village, the hills, the animals, and the time, all clear, and half of the character of Karshish. The inner character of the man emerges as clearly when he comes to deal with Lazarus. This is not a case of the body, he thinks, but of the soul. "The Syrian," he tells his master, "has had catalepsy, and a learned leech of his nation, slain soon afterwards, healed him and brought him back to life after three days. He says he was dead, and made alive again, but that's his madness; though the man seems sane enough. At any rate, his disease has disappeared, he is as well as you and I. But the mind and soul of the man, that is the strange matter, and in that he is entirely unlike other men. Whatever he has gone through has rebathed him as in clear water of another life, and penetrated his whole being. He views the world like a child, he scarcely listens to what goes on about him, yet he is no fool. If one could fancy a man endowed with perfect knowledge,

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beyond the fleshly faculty, and while he has this heaven in him forced to live on earth, such a man is he. His heart and brain move there, his feet stay here. He has lost all sense of our values of things. Vespasian besieging Jerusalem and a mule passing with gourds awaken the same interest. But speak of some little fact, little as we think, and he stands astonished with its prodigious import. If his child sicken to death it does not seem to matter to him, but a gesture, a glance from the child, starts him into an agony of fear and anger, as if the child were undoing the universe. He lives like one between two regions, one of distracting glory, of which he is conscious but must not enter yet, and the other into which he has been exiled back again—and between this region where his soul moves and the earth where the body is, there is so little harmony of thought or feeling that he cannot undertake any human activity, nor unite the demands of the two worlds. He knows that what ought to be cannot be in the world he has returned to, so that his life is perplexed; but in this incessant perplexity he falls back on prone submission to the heavenly will. The time will come when death will restore his being to equilibrium; but now he is out of harmony, for the soul knows more than the body and the body clouds the soul."

"I probed this seeming indifference. 'Beast, to be so still and careless when Rome is at the gates of thy town.' He merely looked with his large eyes at me. Yet the man is not apathetic, but

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loves old and young, the very brutes and birds and flowers of the field. His only impatience is with wrong doing, but he curbs that impatience."

At last Karshish tells, with many apologies for his foolishness, the strangest thing of all. Lazarus thinks that his curer was God himself who came and dwelt in flesh among those he had made, and went in and out among them healing and teaching, and then died. "It is strange, but why write of trivial matters when things of price call every moment for remark? Forget it, my master, pardon me and farewell."

Then comes the postscript, that impression which, in spite of all his knowledge, is left in Karshish's mind—

The very God I think, Abib; dost thou think?  
So, the All-Great were the All-Loving too—  
So, through the thunder comes a human voice  
Saying · "O heart I made, a heart beats here!  
Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!  
Thou hast no power, nor may'st conceive of mine,  
But love I gave thee, with myself to love,  
And thou must love me who have died for thee!"—  
The madman saith He said so, it is strange.

CHAPTER XII  
*IMAGINATIVE REPRESENTATIONS*  
*RENAISSANCE*

THE Imaginative Representations to be discussed in this chapter are those which belong to the time of the Renaissance. We take a great leap when we pass from Karshish and Cleon to Fra Lippo Lippi, from early Christian times to the early manhood of the Renaissance. But these leaps are easy to a poet, and Browning is even more at his ease and in his strength in the fifteenth century than in the first.

We have seen with what force in *Sordello* he realised the life and tumult of the thirteenth century. The fourteenth century does not seem to have attracted him much, though he frequently refers to its work in Florence; but when the Renaissance in the fifteenth century took its turn with decision towards a more open freedom of life and thought, abandoning one after another the conventions of the past; when the moral limits, which the Church still faintly insisted on, were more and more withdrawn and finally blotted out; when, as the century passed into the next, the Church led the revolt against decency, order, and morality; when scepticism took the place of faith, even of duty, and criticism the place of authority, then Browning became interested, not of course



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in the want of faith and in immorality, but in the swift variety and intensity of the movement of intellectual and social life, and in the interlacing changes of the movement. This was an enchanting world for him, and as he was naturally most interested in the arts, he represented the way in which the main elements of the Renaissance appeared to him in poems which were concerned with music, poetry, painting and the rest of the arts, but chiefly with painting. Of course, when the Renaissance began to die down into senile pride and decay, Browning, who never ceased to choose and claim companionship with vigorous life, who abhorred decay either in Nature or nations, in societies or in cliques of culture, who would have preferred a blood-red pirate to the daintiest of decadents—did not care for it, and in only one poem, touched with contemptuous pity and humour, represented its disease and its disintegrating elements, with so much power, however, with such grasping mastery, that it is like a painting by Velasquez. Ruskin said justly that the *Bishop orders his tomb at St. Praxed's Church* concentrated into a few lines all the evil elements of the Renaissance. But this want of care for the decaying Renaissance was contrasted by the extreme pleasure with which he treated its early manhood in *Fra Lippo Lippi*.

The Renaissance had a life and seasons, like those of a human being. It went through its childhood and youth like a boy of genius under the care of parents from whose opinions and mode

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of life he is sure to sever himself in the end ; but who, having made a deep impression on his nature, retain power over, and give direction to, his first efforts at creation. The first art of the Renaissance, awakened by the discovery of the classic remnants, retained a great deal of the faith and superstition, the philosophy, theology, and child-like *naïveté* of the Middle Ages. Its painting and sculpture, but especially the first of these, gave themselves chiefly to the representation of the soul upon the face, and of the untutored and unconscious movements of the body under the influence of religious passion ; that is, such movements as expressed devotion, fervent love of Christ, horror of sin, were chosen, and harmonised with the expression of the face. Painting dedicated its work to the representation of the heavenly life, either on earth in the story of the gospels and in the lives of the saints, or in its glory in the circles of heaven. Then, too, it represented the thought, philosophy, and knowledge of its own time and of the past in symbolic series of quiet figures, in symbolic pictures of the struggle of good with evil, of the Church with the world, of the virtues with their opposites. Naturally, then, the expression on the face of secular passions, the movement of figures in war, and trade and social life and the whole vast field of human life in the ordinary world, were neglected as unworthy of representation ; and the free, full life of the body, its beauty, power and charm, the objects which pleased its senses, the frank representation of its movement under the influence of the

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natural as contrasted with the spiritual passions, were looked upon with religious dismay. Such, but less in sculpture than in painting, was the art of the Renaissance in its childhood and youth, and Browning has scarcely touched that time. He had no sympathy with a neglect of the body, a contempt of the senses or of the beauty they perceived. He claimed the physical as well as the intellectual and spiritual life of man as by origin and of right divine. When, then, in harmony with a great change in social and literary life, the art of the Renaissance began to turn, in its early manhood, from the representation of the soul to the representation of the body in natural movement and beauty ; from the representations of saints, angels and virtues to the representation of actual men and women in the streets and rooms of Florence ; from symbolism to reality—Browning thought, " This suits me ; this is what I love ; I will put this mighty change into a poem." And he wrote *Fra Lippo Lippi*.

As long as this vivid representation of actual human life lasted, the art of the Renaissance was active, original, and interesting ; and as it moved on, developing into higher and finer forms, and producing continually new varieties in its development, it reached its strong and eager manhood. In its art then, as well as in other matters, the Renaissance completed its new and clear theory of life ; it remade the grounds of life, of its action and passion ; and it reconstituted its aims. Browning loved this summer time of the Renais-

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sance, which began with the midst of the fifteenth century. But he loved its beginnings even more than its fulness. That was characteristic. I have said that even when he was eighty years old, his keenest sympathies were with spring rather than summer, with those times of vital change when fresh excitements disturbed the world, when its eyes were smiling with hope, and its feet eager with the joy of pursuit. He rejoiced to analyse and embody a period which was shaking off the past, living intensely in the present, and prophesying the future. It charms us, as we read him, to see his intellect and his soul like two hunting dogs, and with all their eagerness, questing, roving, quartering, with the greatest joy and in incessant movement, over a time like this, where so many diverse, clashing, and productive elements mingled themselves into an enchanting confusion and glory of life. Out of that pleasure of hunting in a morning-tide of humanity, was born *Fra Lippo Lippi*; and there is scarcely an element of the time, except the political elements, which it does not represent; not dwelt on, but touched for the moment and left; unconsciously produced as two men of the time would produce them in conversation. The poem seems as easy as a chat in Pall Mall last night between some intelligent men, which, read two hundred years hence, would inform the reader of the trend of thought and feeling in this present day. But in reality to do this kind of thing well is to do a very difficult thing. It needs a full knowledge, a full imagination and a masterly

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time of this poem. It stretched one hand back to the piety of the past, and retained, though faith and devotion had left them, its observances and conventions; so that, at first, when Lippo was painting, the new only peeped out of the old, like the saucy face of a nymph from the ilexes of a sacred grove. This is the historical moment Browning illustrates. Lippo Lippi was forced to paint the worn religious subjects: Jerome knocking his breast, the choirs of angels and martyrs, the scenes of the Gospel; but out of all he did the eager modern life began to glance! Natural, quaint, original faces and attitudes appeared; the angels smiled like Florentine women; the saints wore the air of Bohemians. There is a picture by Lippo Lippi in the National Gallery of some nine of them sitting on a bench under a hedge of roses, and it is no paradox to say that they might fairly represent the Florentines who tell the tales of the *Decameron*.

The transition as it appeared in art is drawn in this poem. Lippo Lippi became a monk by chance; it was not his vocation. A starving boy, he roamed the streets of Florence; and the widespread intelligence of the city is marked by Browning's account of the way in which the boy observed all the life of the streets for eight years. Then the coming change of the aims of art is indicated by the way in which when he was allowed to paint, he covered the walls of the Carmini, not with saints, virgins, and angels, but with the daily life of the streets—the boy patting the dog, the murderer taking refuge at the

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altar, the white wrath of the avenger coming up the aisle, the girl going to market, the crowd round the stalls in the market, the monks, white, grey, and black—things as they were, as like as two peas to the reality ; flesh and blood now painted, not skin and bone ; not the expression on the face alone, but the whole body in speaking movement ; nothing conventional, nothing imitative of old models, but actual life as it lay before the painter's eyes. Into this fresh æra of art Lippo Lippi led the way with the joy of youth. But he was too soon. The Prior, all the representatives of the conservative elements in the convent, were sorely troubled. " Why, this will never do : faces, arms, legs, and bodies like the true ; life as it is ; nature as she is ; quite impossible. And Browning, in Lippo's defence of himself, paints the conflict of the past with the coming art in a passage too long to quote, too admirable to shorten.

The new art conquered the old. The whole life of Florence was soon painted as it was : the face of the town, the streets, the churches, the towers, the winding river, the mountains round about it ; the country, the fields and hills and hamlets, the peasants at work, ploughing, sowing, and gathering fruit, the cattle feeding, the birds among the trees and in the sky ; nobles and rich burghers hunting, hawking ; the magistrates, the citizens, the street-boys, the fine ladies, the tradesmen's wives, the heads of the guilds ; the women visiting their friends ; the interior of the houses. We may see this art of human life in the apse of Santa Maria

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Novella, painted by the hand of Ghurlandajo : in the Riccardi Palace, painted by Benozzo Gozzoli ; in more than half the pictures of the painters who succeeded Fra Lippo Lippi. Only, so much of the old clings that all this actual Florentine life is painted into the ancient religious subjects—the life of the Baptist and the Virgin, the embassy of the Wise Men, the life of Christ, the legends of the saints, the lives of the virgins and martyrs, Jerusalem and its life painted as if it were Florence and its life—all the spiritual religion gone out of it, it is true, but yet, another kind of religion budding in it—the religion, not of the monastery, but of daily common life.

the world

The beauty and the wonder and the power  
The shapes of things their colours lights and shades,  
Changes surprises—and God made it all!

Who paints these things as if they were alive, and loves them while he paints, paints the garment of God ; and men not only understand their own life better because they see, through the painting, what they did not see before , but also the movement of God's spirit in the beauty of the world and in the life of men. Art interprets to man all that is, and God in it.

Oh oh,

It makes me mad to think what men shall do  
And we in our graves ! This world's no blot for us,  
No blank , it means intensely, and means good  
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.

He could not do it, the time was not ripe

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enough. But he began it. And the spirit of its coming breaks out in all he did.

We take a leap of more than half a century when we pass from *Fra Lippo Lippi* to *Andrea del Sarto*. That advance in art to which Lippo Lippi looked forward with a kind of rage at his own powerlessness had been made. In its making, the art of the Renaissance had painted men and women, both body and soul, in every kind of life, both of war and peace, and better than they had ever been painted before. Having fulfilled that, the painters asked, "What more? What new thing shall we do? What new aim shall we pursue?" And there arose among them a desire to paint all that was paintable, and especially the human body, with scientific perfection. "In our desire to paint the whole of life, we have produced so much that we were forced to paint carelessly or inaccurately. In our desire to be original, we have neglected technique. In our desire to paint the passions on the face and in the movements of men, we have lost the calm and harmony of the ancient classic work, which made its ethical impression of the perfect balance of the divine nature by the ideal arrangement, in accord with a finished science, of the various members of the body to form a finished whole. Let the face no longer then try to represent the individual soul. One type of face for each class of art-representation is enough. Let our effort be to represent beauty by the perfect drawing of the body in repose and in action, and by chosen attitudes and types. Let our composition follow



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certain guiding lines and rules, in accordance with whose harmonies all pictures shall be made. We will follow the Greek ; compose as he did, and by his principles ; and for that purpose maké a scientific study of the body of man ; observing in all painting, sculpture, and architecture the general forms and proportions that ancient art, after many experiments, selected as the best. And, to match that, we must have perfect drawing in all we do.

This great change, which, as art's adulterous connection with science deepened, led to such unhappy results, Browning represents, when its aim had been reached, in his poem, *Andrea del Sarto* ; and he tells us—through Andrea's talk with his wife Lucretia—what he thought of it ; and what Andrea himself, whose broken life may have opened his eyes to the truth of things, may himself have thought of it. On that element in the poem I have already dwelt, and shall only touch on the scenery and tragedy, of the piece :

We sit with Andrea, looking out to Fiesole.

•

sober, pleasant Fiesole.

There's the bell clinking from the chapel top ;  
That length of convent-wall across the way  
Holds the trees safer, huddled more inside ;  
The last monk leaves the garden ; days decrease,  
And autumn grows, autumn in everything.

As the poem goes on, the night falls, falls with the deepening of the painter's depression ; the owls cry from the hull, Florence wears the grey hue of the heart of Andrea ; and Browning weaves the

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autumn and the night into the tragedy of the painter's life.

That tragedy was pitiful. Andrea del Sarto was a faultless painter and a weak character ; and it fell to his lot to love with passion a faithless woman. His natural weakness was doubled by the weakness engendered by unconquerable passion ; and he ruined his life, his art, and his honour, to please his wife. He wearied her, as women are wearied, by passion unaccompanied by power ; and she endured him only while he could give her money and pleasures. She despised him for that endurance, and all the more that he knew she was guilty, but said nothing lest she should leave him. Browning fills his main subject—his theory of the true aim of art—with this tragedy ; and his treatment of it is a fine example of his passionate humanity ; and the passion of it is knitted up with close reasoning and illuminated by his intellectual play.

It is worth a reader's while to read, along with this poem, Alfred de Musset's short play, *André del Sarto*. The tragedy of the situation is deepened by the French poet, and the end is told. Unlike Browning, only a few lines sketch the time, its temper, and its art. It is the depth of the tragedy which De Musset paints, and that alone ; and in order to deepen it, Andrea is made a much nobler character than he is in Browning's poem. The betrayal is also made more complete, more overwhelming. Lucretia is false to Andrea with his favourite pupil, with Cordiani, to whom he had

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given all he had, whom he loved almost as much as he loved his wife. <sup>^</sup> Terrible, inevitable Fate broods over this brief and masterly little play.

The next of these imaginative representations of the Renaissance is, *The Bishop orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church*. We are placed in the full decadence of the Renaissance. Its total loss of religion, even in the Church ; its immorality—the bishop's death-bed is surrounded by his natural sons and the wealth he leaves has been purchased by every kind of iniquity—its pride of life ; its luxury ; its semi-Paganism ; its imitative classicism ; its inconsistency ; its love of jewels, and fine stones, and rich marbles ; its jealousy and envy ; its pleasure in the adornment of death ; its delight in the outsides of things, in mere workmanship ; its loss of originality ; its love of scholarship for scholarship's sake alone ; its contempt of the common people ; its exhaustion—are one and all revealed or suggested in this astonishing poem.

These are the three greater poems dedicated to this period ; but there are some minor poems which represent different phases of its life. One of these is the *Pictor Ignotus*. There must have been many men, during the vital time of the Renaissance, who, born, as it were, into the art-ability of the period, reached without trouble a certain level in painting, but who had no genius, who could not create ; or who, if they had some touch of genius, had no boldness to strike it into fresh forms of beauty ; shy, retiring men, to whom the criticism of the

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world was a pain they knew they could not bear. These men are common at a period when life is racing rapidly through the veins of a vivid city like Florence. The general intensity of the life lifts them to a height they would never reach in a dull and sleepy age. The life they have is not their own, but the life of the whole town. And this keen perception of life outside of them persuades them that they can do all that men of real power can do. In reality, they can do nothing and make nothing worth a people's honour. Browning, who himself was compact of boldness, who loved experiment in what was new, and who shaped what he conceived without caring for criticism, felt for these men, of whom he must have met many; and, asking himself "How they would think; what they would do; and how life would seem to them," wrote this poem. In what way will poor human nature excuse itself for failure? How will the weakness in the man try to prove that it was power? How, having lost the joy of life, will he attempt to show that his loss is gain, his failure a success; and, being rejected of the world, approve himself within?

This was a subject to please Browning; meat such as his soul loved: a nice, involved, Dædalian, labyrinthine sort of thing, a mixture of real sentiment and self-deceit; and he surrounded it with his pity for its human weakness.

"I could have painted any picture that I pleased," cries this painter; "represented on the face any passion, any virtue." If he could he

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would have done it, or tried it. Genius cannot hold itself in.

"I have dreamed of sending forth some picture which should enchant the world (and he alludes to Cimabue's picture)—

"Bound for some great state,  
Or glad aspiring little burgh, it went --  
Flowers cast upon the car which bore the freight,  
Through old streets named afresh from the event.

"That would have been, had I willed it. But mixed with the praisers there would have been cold, critical faces; judges who would press on me and mock. And I--I could not bear it." Alas! had he had genius, no fear would have stayed his hand, no judgment of the world delayed his work. What stays a river breaking from its fountain-head?

So he sank back, saying the world was not worthy of his labours. "What? Expose my noble work (things he had conceived but not done) to the prate and pettiness of the common buyers who hang it on their walls! No, I will rather paint the same monotonous round of Virgin, Child, and Saints in the quiet church, in the sanctuary's gloom. No merchant then will traffic in my heart. My pictures will moulder and die. Let them die. I have not vulgarised myself or them." Brilliant and nobly wrought as the first three poems are of which I have written, this quiet little piece needed and received a finer workmanship, and was more difficult than they.

Then there is *How it strikes a Contemporary*—the story of the gossip of a Spanish town about a

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poor poet, who, because he wanders everywhere about the streets observing all things, is mistaken for a spy of the king. The long pages he writes are said to be letters to the king ; the misfortunes of this or that man are caused by his information. The world thinks him a wonder of cleverness ; he is but an inferior poet. It imagines that he lives in Assyrian luxury ; he lives and dies in a naked garret. This imaginative representation might be of any time in a provincial town of an ignorant country like Spain. It is a slight study of what superstitious imagination and gossip will work up round any man whose nature and manners, like those of a poet, isolate him from the common herd. Force is added to this study by its scenery. The Moorish windows, the shops, the gorgeous magistrates pacing down the promenade, are touched in with a flying pencil ; and then, moving through the crowd, the lean, black-coated figure, with his cane and dog and his peaked hat, clear flint eyes and beaked nose, is seen, as if alive, in the vivid sunshine of Valladolid. But what Browning wished most to describe in this poem was one of the first marks of a poet, even of a poor one like this gentleman—the power of seeing and observing everything. Nothing was too small, nothing uninteresting in this man's eyes. His very hat was scrutinising.

He stood and watched the cobbler at his trade,  
The man who slices lemons into drink, —  
The coffee-roaster's brazier, and the boys  
That volunteer to help him turn its winch.  
He glanced o'er books on stalls with half an eye,

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And fly-leaf ballads on the vendor's string,  
And broad-edged bold-print posters by the wall  
He took such cognisance of man and things,  
If any beat a horse you felt he saw,  
If any cursed a woman, he took note,  
Yet stared at nobody you stared at him,  
And found less to your pleasure than surprise,  
He seemed to know you and expect as much

That is the artist's way. It was Browning's way. He is describing himself. In that fashion he roamed through Venice or Florence, stopping every moment, attracted by the smallest thing, finding a poem in everything, lost in himself yet seeing all that surrounded him, isolated in thinking, different from and yet like the rest of the world

Another poem—*My Last Duchess*—must be mentioned. It is plainly placed in the midst of the period of the Renaissance by the word *Ferrara*, which is added to its title. But it is rather a picture of two temperaments which may exist in any cultivated society, and at any modern time. There are numbers of such men as the Duke and such women as the Duchess in our midst. Both are, however, drawn with mastery. Browning has rarely done his work with more insight, with greater keenness of portraiture, with happier brevity and selection. As in *The Flight of the Duchess*, untoward fate has bound together two temperaments sure to clash with each other—and no gipsy comes to deliver the woman in this case. The man's nature kills her. It happens every day. The Renaissance society may have built up more men of this type than ours, but they are not peculiar to it.

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Germany, not Italy, is, I think, the country in which Browning intended to place two other poems which belong to the time of the Renaissance—*Johannes Agricola in Meditation* and *A Grammarian's Funeral*. Their note is as different from that of the Italian poems as the national temper of Germany is from that of Italy. They have no sense of beauty for beauty's sake alone. Their atmosphere is not soft or gay but somewhat stern. The logical arrangement of them is less one of feeling than of thought. There is a stronger manhood in them, a grimmer view of life. The sense of duty to God and Man, but little represented in the Italian poems of the Renaissance, does exist in these two German poems. Moreover, there is in them a full representation of aspiration to the world beyond. But the Italian Renaissance lived for the earth alone, and its loveliness, too close to earth to care for heaven.

It pleased Browning to throw himself fully into the soul of Johannes Agricola, and he does it with so much personal fervour that it seems as if, in one of his incarnations, he had been the man, and, for the moment of his writing, was dominated by him. The mystic-passion fills the poetry, with keen and dazzling light, and it is worth while, from this point of view, to compare the poem with Tennyson's *Sir Galahad*, and on another side, with *St. Simeon Stylites*.

Johannes Agricola was one of the products of the reforming spirit of the sixteenth century in Germany, one of its wild extremes. He believes



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that God had chosen him among a few to be his for ever and for his own glory from the foundation of the world. He did not say that all sin was permitted to the saints, that what the flesh did was no matter, like those wild fanatics, one of whom Scott draws in *Woodstock* ; but he did say, that if he sinned it made no matter to his election by God. Nay, the immanence of God in him turned the poison to health, the filth to jewels. Goodness and badness make no matter ; God's choice is all. The martyr for truth, the righteous man whose life has saved the world, but who is not elected, is damned for ever in burning hell. " I am eternally chosen ; for that I praise God. I do not understand it. If I did, could I praise Him ? But I know my settled place in the divine decrees." I quote the beginning. It is pregnant with superb spiritual audacity, and kindled with imaginative pride.

There's heaven above and night by night  
 I look right through its gorgeous roof,  
 No suns and moons though e'er so bright  
 Avail to stop me, splendour-proof  
 Keep the broods of stars about  
 For I intend to get to God  
 For 'tis to God I speed so fast  
 For in God's breast my own abode  
 Those shoals of dazzling glory, passed,  
 I lay my spirit down at last  
 I lie where I have always lain,  
 God smiles as he has always smiled,  
 If suns and moons could wax and wane,  
 Ere' tars were thunder-girt, or piled  
 The heavens God thought on me his child,  
 Ordained a life for me, arrayed  
 Its circumstances every one

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To the minutest ; ay, God said  
This head this hand should rest upon  
Thus, ere he fashioned star or sun.  
And having thus created me,  
Thus rooted me, he bade me grow,  
Guiltless for ever, like a tree  
That buds and blooms, nor seeks to know  
The law by which it prospers so  
But sure that thought and word and deed  
All go to swell his love for me,  
Me, made because that love had need  
Of something irreversibly  
Pledged solely its contents to be

As to *A Grammarian's Funeral*, that poem also belongs to the German rather than to the Italian spirit. The Renaissance in Italy lost its religion ; at the same time, in Germany, it added a reformation of religion to the New Learning. The Renaissance in Italy desired the fulness of knowledge in this world, and did not look for its infinities in the world beyond. In Germany the same desire made men call for the infinities of knowledge beyond the earth. A few Italians, like Savonarola, like M. Angelo, did the same, and failed to redeem their world ; but eternal aspiration dwelt in the soul of every German who had gained a religion. In Italy, as the Renaissance rose to its luxury and trended to its decay, the pull towards personal righteousness made by belief in an omnipotent goodness who demands the subjection of our will to his, ceased to be felt by artists, scholars and cultivated society. A man's will was his only law. On the other hand, the life of the New Learning in Germany and England was weighted

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with a sense of duty to an eternal Righteousness. The love of knowledge or beauty was modified into seriousness of life, carried beyond this life in thought, kept clean, and, though filled with incessant labour on the earth, aspired to reach its fruition only in the life to come.

This is the spirit and the atmosphere of the *Grammarian's Funeral*, and Browning's little note at the beginning says that its time "was shortly after the revival of learning in Europe." I have really no proof that Browning laid the scene of his poem in Germany, save perhaps the use of such words as "thorp" and "croft," but there is a clean, pure morning light playing through the verse, a fresh, health-breathing northern air, which does not fit in with Italy; a joyous, buoyant youthfulness in the song and march of the students who carry their master with gay strength up the mountain to the very top, all of them filled with his aspiring spirit, all of them looking forward with gladness and vigour to life—which has no relation whatever to the temper of Florentine or Roman life during the age of the Medici. The bold brightness, moral earnestness, pursuit of the ideal, spiritual intensity, reverence for good work and for the man who did it, which breathe in the poem, differ by a whole world from the atmosphere of life in *Andrea del Sarto*. These are a crowd of men who are moving upwards, who, seizing the Renaissance elements, knitted them through and through with reformation of life, faith in God, and hope for man. They had a future and knew it. The semi-pagan-

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ism of the Renaissance had not, and did not know it had not.

We may close this series of Renaissance representations by *A Toccata of Galuppi's*. It cannot take rank with the others as a representative poem. It is of a different class; a changeful dream of images and thoughts which came to Browning as he was playing a piece of eighteenth-century Venetian music. But in the dream there is a sketch of that miserable life of fruitless pleasure, the other side of which was dishonourable poverty, into which Venetian society had fallen in the eighteenth century. To this the pride, the irreligion, the immorality, the desire of knowledge and beauty for their own sake alone, had brought the noblest, wisest, and most useful city in Italy. That part of the poem is representative. It is the end of such a society as is drawn in *The Bishop orders his tomb at St. Praxed's Church*. That tomb is placed in Rome, but it is in Venice that this class of tombs reached their greatest splendour of pride, opulence, folly, debasement and irreligion.

Finally, there are a few poems which paint the thoughts, the sorrows, the pleasures, and the political passions of modern Italy. There is the *Italian in England*, full of love for the Italian peasant and of pity for the patriot forced to live and die far from his motherland. Mazzini used to read it to his fellow-exiles to show them how fully an English poet could enter into the temper of their soul. So far it may be said to represent a type. But it scarcely comes under the range of this chapter.

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But *Up in a Villa, down in the City*, is so vivid a representation of all that pleased a whole type of the city-bred and poor nobles of Italy at the time when Browning wrote the *Dramatic Lyrics* that I cannot omit it. It is an admirable piece of work, crowded with keen descriptions of nature in the Casentino, and of life in the streets of Florence. And every piece of description is so filled with the character of the "Italian person of quality" who describes them—a petulant, humorous, easily angered, happy, observant, ignorant, poor gentleman—that Browning entirely disappears. The poem retains for us in its verse, and indeed in its light rhythm, the childlikeness, the *naïveté*, the simple pleasures, the ignorance, and the honest boredom with the solitudes of nature—of a whole class of Italians, not only of the time when it was written, but of the present day. It is a delightful, inventive piece of gay and pictorial humour.

## CHAPTER XIII

### *WOMANHOOD IN BROWNING*

THE first woman we meet in Browning's poetry is Pauline ; a twofold person, exceedingly unlike the woman usually made by a young poet. She is not only the Pauline idealised and also materialised by the selfish passion of her lover, but also the real woman whom Browning has conceived underneath the lover's image of her. This doubling of his personages, as seen under two diverse aspects or by two different onlookers, in the same poem, is not unfrequent in his poetry, and it pleased his intellect to make these efforts. When the thing was well done, its cleverness was amazing, even imaginative ; when it was ill done, it was confusing. Tennyson never did this ; he had not analytic power enough. What he sees of his personages is all one, quite clearly drawn and easy to understand. But we miss in them, and especially in his women, the intellectual play, versatility and variety of Browning. Tennyson's women sometimes border on dulness, are without that movement, change and surprises, which in women disturb mankind for evil or for good. If Tennyson had had a little more of Browning's imaginative analysis, and Browning a little less of it, both would have been better artists.

The Pauline of the lover is the commonplace

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woman whom a young man so often invents out of a woman for his use and pleasure. She is to be his salvation, to sympathise with his ideals, joys and pains, to give him everything, with herself, and to live for him and him alone. Nothing can be more *naïf* and simple than this common selfishness which forgets that a woman has her own life, her own claim on the man, and her own individuality to develop, and this element in the poem, which never occurs again in Browning's poetry, may be the record of an early experience. If so, he had escaped from this youthful error before he had finished the poem, and despised it, perhaps too much. It is excusable and natural in the young. His contempt for this kind of love is embodied in the second Pauline. She is not the woman her lover imagines her to be, but far older and more experienced than her lover; who has known long ago what love was, who always liked to be loved, who therefore suffers her lover to expatiate as wildly as he pleases, but whose life is quite apart from him, enduring him with pleasurable patience, criticising him, wondering how he can be so excited. There is a dim perception in the lover's phrases of these elements in his mistress' character; and that they are in her character is quite plain from the patronising piece of criticism in French which Browning has put into her mouth. The first touch of his humour appears in the contrast of the gentle and lofty boredom of the letter with the torrents of love in the poem. And if we may imagine that the lover is partly an image of

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what Browning once felt in a youthful love, we may also think that the making of the second and critical Pauline was his record, when his love had passed, of what he thought about it all.

This mode of treatment, so much more analytic than imaginative, belongs to Browning as an artist. He seems, while he wrote, as if half of him sat apart from the personages he was making, contemplating them in his observant fashion, discussing them coolly in his mind while the other half of him wrote about them with emotion; placing them in different situations and imagining what they would then do; inventing trials for them and recombining, through these trials, the elements of their characters; arguing about and around them, till he sometimes loses the unity of their personality. This is a weakness in his work when he has to create characters in a drama who may be said, like Shakespeare's, to have, once he has created them, a life of their own independent of the poet. His spinning of his own thoughts about their characters makes us often realise, in his dramas, the individuality of Browning more than the individuality of the characters. We follow him at this work with keen intellectual pleasure, but we do not always follow him with a passionate humanity.

On the contrary, this habit, which was one cause of his weakness as an artist in the drama, increased his strength as an artist when he made single pictures of men and women at isolated crises in their lives; or when he pictured them as they



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seemed at the moment to one, two, or three differently tempered persons—pictorial sketches and studies which we may hang up in the chambers of the mind for meditation or discussion. Their intellectual power and the emotional interest they awaken, the vivid imaginative lightning which illuminates them in flashes, arise out of that part of his nature which made him a weak dramatist.

Had he chosen, for example, to paint Lady Carlisle as he conceived her, in an isolated portrait, and in the same circumstances as in his drama of *Strafford*, we should have had a clear and intimate picture of her moving, alive at every point, amidst the decay and shipwreck of the Court. But in the play she is a shade who comes and goes, unoutlined, confused and confusing, scarcely a woman at all. The only clear hints of what Browning meant her to be are given in the *asides* of *Strafford*.

Browning may have been content with *Strafford* as a whole, but, with his passion for vitality, he could not have been content with either Lady Carlisle or the Queen as representatives of women. Indeed, up to this point, when he had written *Pauline*, *Paracelsus* and *Strafford*, he must have felt that he had left out of his poetry one half of the human race; and his ambition was to represent both men and women. Pauline's chief appearance is in French prose. Michel, in *Paracelsus*, is a mere silhouette of the sentimental German Frau, a soft sympathiser with her husband, and with the young eager Paracelsus, who longs to leave the

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home she would not leave for the world—an excellent and fruitful mother. She is set in a pleasant garden landscape. Twice Browning tries to get more out of her and to lift her into reality. But the men carry him away from her, and she remains undrawn. These mere images, with the exception of the woman in *Porphyria's Lover*, who, with a boldness which might have astonished even Byron but is characteristic of Browning in his audacious youth, leaves the ball to visit her lover in the cottage in the garden—are all that he had made of womanhood in 1837 four years after he had begun to publish poetry.

It was high time he should do something better, and he had now begun to know more of the variousness of women and of their resolute grip on life and affairs. So in *Sordello*, he created Palma. She runs through the poem, and her appearances mark turning points in *Sordello's* development, but three she appears in full colour and set in striking circumstances: first, in the secret room of the palace at Verona with *Sordello* when she expounds her policy, and afterwards when she leans with him amid a gush of torch-fire over the balcony, whence the grey haired councillors spoke to the people surging in the square and shouting for the battle. The second time is in the streets of Ferrara, full of camping men and fires, and the third is when she waits with *Taurello* in the vaulted room below the chamber where *Sordello* has been left to decide what side he shall take, for the Emperor or the Pope. He dies while they wait, but there

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is no finer passage in the poem than this of Palma and Taurello talking in the dim corridor of the new world they would make for North Italy with Sordello. It is not dramatic characterisation, but magnificent individualisation of the woman and the man.

We see Palma first as a girl at Goito, where she fills Sordello with dreams, and Browning gives her the beauty of the Venetians Titian painted.

How the tresses curled  
Into a sumptuous swell of gold and wound  
About her like a glory! even the ground  
Was bright as with split sunbeams

Full consciousness of her beauty is with her, frank triumph in it, but she is still a child. At the Court of Love she is a woman, not only conscious of her loveliness, but able to use it to bind and loose, having sensuous witchery and intellectual power, that terrible combination. She lays her magic on Sordello.

But she is not only the woman of personal magic and beauty. Being of high rank and mixed with great events, she naturally becomes the political woman, a common type in the thirteenth century. And Browning gives her the mental power to mould and direct affairs. She uses her personal charm to lure Sordello into politics.

Her wise  
And lucid words are yet about the room  
Her presence wholly poured upon the gloom  
Down even to her vesture's creeping stir  
And so reclines he saturate with her

\* \* \* \* \*

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But when she felt she held her friend indeed  
Safe she threw back her curls to gain implant  
Her lessons

Her long discourse on the state of parties, and how Sordello may in mastering them complete his being fascinates him and us by the charm of her intelligence

But the political woman has often left love behind. Politics like devotion are a woman's reaction from the weariness of loving and being loved. But Palma is young, and in the midst of her politics she retains passion, sentiment, tenderness and charm. She dreams of some soul beyond her own, who coming should call on all the force in her character, enable her, in loving him, to give consummation to her work for Italy, and be himself the hand and sword of her mind. Therefore she held herself in leash till the right man came, till she loved. 'Wares he not' her heart cries, and mixes him with coming Spring.

Wait he not the waking year  
His diamond blossoms must be hon'ry ripe  
By this to welcome him fresh rumsels ripe  
The thaved' ravine because of him the wind  
Walks like a child I shall surely find  
Him now

She finds him in Sordello, and summons him, when the time is ripe, to Verona. Love and ambition march together in her now. In and out of all her schemes Sordello moves. The glory of her vision of North Italian rule is like a halo round his brow. Not one political purpose is lost, but all are transfigured in her by love. Softness and strength,

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intellect and feeling meet in her. This is a woman nobly carved, and the step from Michel, Pauline and Lady Carlisle to her is an immense one.

By exercise of his powers Browning's genius had swiftly developed. There comes a time, sooner or later, to a great poet when, after many experiments, the doors of his intellect and soul fly open, and his genius is flooded with the action and thought of what seems a universe. And with this revelation of Man and Nature, a tidal wave of creative power, new and impelling, carries the poet far beyond the station where last he rested. It came to Browning now. The creation of Palma would be enough to prove it, but there is not a character or scene in *Sordello* which does not also prove it.

In this new outrush of his genius he created a very different woman from Palma. He created Pippa, the Asolan girl, at the other end of society from Palma, at the other end of feminine character. Owing to the host of new thoughts which in this early summer of genius came pouring into his soul—all of which he tried to express, rejecting none, choosing none out of the rest, expressing only half of a great number of them; so delighted with them all that he could leave none out—he became obscure in *Sordello*. Owing also to the great complexity of the historical *mise-en-scène* in which he placed his characters in that poem, he also became obscure. Had he been an experienced artist he would have left out at least a third of the thoughts

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and scenes he inserted. As it was, he threw all his thoughts and all the matters he had learnt about the politics, cities, architecture, customs, war, gardens, religion and poetry of North Italy in the thirteenth century, pell-mell into this poem, and left them, as it were, to find their own places. This was very characteristic of a young man when the pot of his genius was boiling over. Nothing bolder, more incalculable, was ever done by a poet in the period of his storm and stress. The boundless and to express it was never sought with more audacity. It was impossible, in this effort, for him to be clear, and we need not be vexed with him. The daring, the rush, the unconsciousness and the youth of it all, are his excuse, but not his praise. And when the public comes to understand that the dimness and complexity of *Sordello* arise from plenteousness not scarcity of thought, and that they were not a pose of the poet's but the swelling outbreak of a full fountain just let loose from its mountain chamber, it will have a personal liking, not perhaps for the poem but for Browning. "I will not read the book," it will say, "but I am glad he had it in him."

Still it was an artistic failure, and when Browning understood that the public could not comprehend him—and we must remember that he desired to be comprehended, for he loved mankind—he thought he would use his powers in a simpler fashion, and please the honest folk. So in the joy of having got rid in *Sordello* of so many of his thoughts by expression and of mastering the rest ;

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and determined, since he had been found difficult, to be the very opposite—loving contrast like a poet—he wrote *Pippa Passes*. I need not describe its plan. Our business is with the women in it.

Ottima, alive with carnal passion, in the fire of which the murder of her husband seems a mere incident, is an audacious sketch, done in splashes of ungradated colour. Had Browning been more in the woman's body and soul he would not have done her in jerks as he has done. Her trick of talking of the landscape, as if she were on a holiday like Pippa, is not as subtly conceived or executed as it should be, and is too far away from her dominant carnality to be natural. And her sensualism is too coarse for her position. A certain success is attained, but the imagination is frequently jarred. The very outburst of unsensual love at the end, when her love passes from the flesh into the spirit, when self-sacrifice dawns upon her and she begins to suffer the first agonies of redemption, is plainly more due to the poet's pity than to the woman's spirit. Again, Sebald is the first to feel remorse after the murder. Ottima only begins to feel it when she thinks her lover is ceasing to love her. I am not sure that to reverse the whole situation would not be nearer to the truth of things; but that is matter of discussion. Then the subject-matter is sordid. Nothing relieves the coarseness of Sebald, Ottima and Luca and their relations to one another but the few descriptions of nature and the happy flash of innocence when Pippa passes by. Nor are there any large

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fates behind the tale or large effects to follow which might lift the crime into dignity. This mean, commonplace, ugly kind of subject had a strange attraction for Browning, as we see in *The Inn Album*, in *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, and else where. I may add that it is curious to find him, in 1841, writing exactly like a modern realist, nearly fifty years before realism of this kind had begun. And this illustrates what I have said of the way in which he anticipated by so many years the kind of work to which the literary world should come. The whole scene between Sebald and Ottima might have been written by a powerful, relentless modern novelist.

We have more of this realism, but done with great skill, humanity, even tenderness, in the meeting and talk of the young harlotry on the steps of the Duomo near the fountain. When we think of this piece of bold, clear, impressionist reality cast into the midst of the proprieties of literature in 1841, it is impossible not to wonder and smile. The girls are excellently drawn and varied from each other. Browning's pity gathers round them, and something of underlying purity, of natural grace of soul, of tenderness in memory of their youth emerges in them; and the charm of their land is round their ways. There was also in his mind, I think, a sense of picturesqueness in their class when they were young, which, mingling with his pity for them, attracted his imagination, or touched into momentary life that roving element in a poet which resents the barriers made by social and



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domestic purity. *Fifine at the Fair* is partly a study of that temper which comes and goes, goes and comes in the life not only of poets but of ordinary men and women.

Then, to illustrate this further, there is in *Sordello* a brilliant sketch of girls of this kind at Venice, full of sunlight, colour and sparkling water, in which he has seen these butterflies of women as a painter would see them, or as a poet who, not thinking then of moral questions or feeling pity for their fate, is satisfied for the flying moment with the picture they make, with the natural freedom of their life.

But he does not leave that picture without a representation of the other side of this class of womanhood. It was a daring thing, when he wished to say that he would devote his whole work to the love and representation of humanity to symbolise it by a sorrowful street-girl in Venice who wistfully asks an alms; worn and broken with sorrow and wrong; whose eyes appeal for pity, for comprehension of her good and for his love; and whose fascination and beauty are more to him than those of her unsuffering companions. The other side of that class of woman is here given with clear truth and just compassion, and the representation is lifted into imaginative strength, range and dignity of thought and feeling by her being made the image of the whole of humanity. "This woman," he thought, "is humanity, whom I love, who asks the poet in me to reveal her as she is, a divine seed of God to find some day its flower-

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ing—the broken harlot of the universe, who will be, far off, the Magdalen redeemed by her ineradicable love. That, and with every power I have, I will, as poet, love and represent!”

This is the imagination working at its best, with its most penetrative and passionate power, and Browning is far greater as a poet in this Thing of his, where thought and love are knit into union to give birth to moral, intellectual and spiritual beauty, than he is in those lighter and cleverer poems in which he sketches with a facile but too discursive a pencil, the transient moments, grave or light, of the lives of women. Yet thus and they show his range, his variety, the embracing of his sympathy.

Over against these girls in the market-place, against Ottima in her guilt, and Phene who is as yet a nonentity (her speech to the sculptor is too plainly Browning's analysis of the moment, not her own thinking—no girl of fourteen brought up by Natalia would talk in that fashion) is set Pippa, the light, life and love of the day, the town, the people and the poem. She passes like an angel by and touches with her wing events and persons and changes them to good. She has some natural genius, and is as unconscious of her genius as she is of the good she does. In her unconsciousness is the fountain of her charm. She lives like a flower of the field that knows not it has blest and comforted with its beauty the traveller, who have passed it by. She has only one day in the whole year for her own, and for that day she creates a

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fresh personality for herself. She clothes her soul, intellect, imagination, and spiritual aspiration in holiday garments for the day, becoming for the time a new poetic self, and able to choose any other personality in Asolo from hour to hour—the queen and spirit of the town; not wishing to be, actually, the folk she passes by, but only, since she is so isolated, to be something in their lives, to touch them for help and company.

The world of nature speaks to her and loves her. She sees all that is beautiful, feeds on it, and grasps the matter of thought that underlies the beauty. And so much is she at home with nature that she is able to describe with ease in words almost as noble as the thing itself the advent of the sun. When she leaps out of her bed to meet the leap of the sun, the hymn of description she sings might be sung by the Hours themselves as they dance round the car of the god. She can even play with the great Mother as with an equal, or like her child. The charming gaiety with which she speaks to the sunlights that dance in her room, and to the flowers which are her sisters, prove, however isolated her life may be, that she is never alone. Along with this brightness she has seriousness, the sister of her gaiety, the deep seriousness of imagination, the seriousness also of the evening when meditation broods over the day and its doings before sleep. These, with her sweet humanity, natural piety, instinctive purity, compose her of soft sunshine and soft shadow. Nor does her sadness at the close, which is overcome by her

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trust in God, make her less but more dear to us. She is a beautiful creation. There are hosts of happy women like her. They are the salt of the earth. But few poets have made so much of them and so happily, or sung about these birds of God so well as Browning has in *Pippa Passes*.

That was in 1841. Pleased with his success in this half-lyrical, half-dramatic piece, he was lured towards the drama again, and also to try his hand at those short lyrics—records of transient emotion on fanciful subjects—or records of short but intense moments of thought or feeling. It is a pity that he did not give to dramatic lyrics (in which species of poetry he is quite our first master) the time he gave to dramas, in which he is not much better than an amateur. Nevertheless, we cannot omit the women in the dramas. I have already written of Lady Carlisle. Polyxena, in *King Victor and King Charles*, is partly the political woman and partly the sensible and loving wife of a strangely tempered man. She is fairly done, but is not interesting. Good womanly intelligence in affairs, good womanly support of her man, clear womanly insight into men and into intrigue—a woman of whom there are hundreds of thousands in every rank of life. In her, as in so much of Browning's work, the intellect of the woman is of a higher quality than the intellect of the man.

Next, among his women, is Anael in the *Return of the Druses*. She is placed in too unnatural a situation to allow her nature to have fair play.

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In the preternatural world her superstition creates, she adores Djabal, murders the Prefect, and dies by her own hand. She is, in that world, a study of a young girl's enthusiasm for her faith and her country, and for the man she thinks divine; and were the subject, so far as it relates to her character, well or clearly wrought, she might be made remarkable. As it is wrought, it is so intertwined with complex threads of thought and passion that any clear outline of her character is lost. Both Djabal and she are like clouds illuminated by flashes of sheet lightning which show an infinity of folds and shapes of vapour in each cloud, but show them only for an instant; and then, when the flashes come again, show new folds, new involutions. The characters are not allowed by Browning to develop themselves.

Anael, when she is in the preternatural world, loves Djabal as an incarnation of the divine, but in the natural world of her girlhood her heart goes out to the Knight of Malta who loves her. The in-and-out of these two emotional states—one in the world of religious enthusiasm, and one in her own womanhood, as they cross and re-cross one another—is elaborated with merciless analysis; and Anael's womanhood appears, not as a whole, but in bits and scraps. How will this young girl, divided by two contemporaneous emotions, one in the supernatural and one in the natural world, act in a crisis of her life? Well, the first, conquering the second, brings about her death the moment she tries to transfer the second into the world of the

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first—her dim, half-conscious love for Lois into her conscious adoration of Djabal.

Mildred and Guendolen are the two women in *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*. Guendolen is the incarnation of high-hearted feminine commonsense, of clear insight into the truth of things, born of the power of love in her. Amid all the weaknesses of the personages and the plot ; in the wildered situation made by a confused clashing of pride and innocence and remorse, in which Browning, as it were on purpose to make a display of his intellectual ability, involves those poor folk—Guendolen is the rock on which we can rest in peace ; the woman of the world, yet not worldly ; full of experience, yet having gained by every experience more of love ; just and strong yet pitiful, and with a healthy but compassionate contempt for the intelligence of the men who belong to her.

Contrasted with her, and the quality of her love contrasted also, is Mildred, the innocent child girl who loves for love's sake, and continues to be lost in her love. But Browning's presentation of her innocence, her love, is spoiled by the over-remorse, shame and fear under whose power he makes her so helpless. They are in the circumstances so unnaturally great that they lower her innocence and love, and the natural courage of innocence and love. These rise again to their first level, but it is only the passion of her lover's death which restores them. And when they recur, she is outside of girlhood. One touch of the courage she shows in the last scene would have saved in the previous

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is hungry for love, that you love her; and that, as she cannot marry a subject, you will be content with me, whom the Queen loves.' Norbert objects, and no wonder, to this lying business, but he does it; and the Queen runs to Constance, crying, "I am loved, thank God! I will throw everything aside and marry him. I thought he loved you, but he loves me." Then Constance, wavering from truth again, says that the Queen is right. Norbert does love her. And this is supposed by some to be a noble self-sacrifice, done in pity for the Queen. It is much more like jealousy.

Then, finding that all Norbert's future depends on the Queen, she is supposed to sacrifice herself again, this time for Norbert's sake. She will give him up to the Queen, for the sake of his career; and she tells the Queen, before Norbert, that he has confessed to her his love for the Queen—another lie! Norbert is indignant—he may well be—and throws down all this edifice of falsehood. The Queen knows then the truth, and leaves them in a fury. Constance and Norbert fly into each other's arms, and the tramp of the soldiers who come to arrest them is heard as the curtain falls.

I do not believe that Browning meant to make self-sacrifice the root of Constance's doings. If he did, he has made a terrible mess of the whole thing. He was much too clear-headed a moralist to link self-sacrifice to systematic lying. Self-sacrifice is not self-sacrifice at all when it sacrifices truth. It then wears the clothes of Love, but, in injuring righteousness, it injures the essence of love. It has

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then a surface beauty, for it imitates love, but if mankind is allured by this beauty, mankind is injured. It is the false Florimel of self-sacrifice. Browning, who had studied self-sacrifice, did not exhibit it in Constance. There is something else at the root of her actions, and I believe he meant it to be jealousy. The very first lie she urges her lover to tell (that is, to let the Queen imagine he loves her) is just the thing a jealous woman would invent to try her lover and the Queen, if she suspected the Queen of loving him, and him of being seduced from her by the worldly advantage of marrying the Queen. And all the other lies are best explained on the supposition of jealous experiments. At the last she is satisfied; the crowning test had been tried. Through a sea of lying she had made herself sure of Norbert's love, and she falls into his arms. Had Browning meant Constance to be an image of self-sacrifice, he would scarcely have written that line when Norbert, having told the truth of the matter to the Queen, looks at both women, and cries out, "You two glare, each at each, like panthers now." A woman, filled with the joy and sadness of pure self-sacrifice, would not have felt at this moment like a panther towards the woman for whom she had sacrificed herself.

Even as a study of jealousy, Constance is too subtle. Jealousy has none of these labyrinthine methods; it goes straight with fiery passion to its end. It may be said, then, that Constance is not a study of jealousy. But it may be a study by Browning of what he thought in his intellect



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jealousy would be. At any rate, Constance, as a study of self-sacrifice, is a miserable failure. Moreover, it does not make much matter whether she is a study of this or that, because she is eminently wrong-natured. Her lying is unendurable, only to be explained or excused by the madness of jealousy, and she, though jealous, is not maddened enough by jealousy to excuse her lies. The situations she causes are almost too ugly. Whenever the truth is told, either by the Queen or Norbert, the situations break up in disgrace for her. It is difficult to imagine how Norbert could go on loving her. His love would have departed if they had come to live together. He is radically true, and she is radically false. A fatal split would have been inevitable. Nothing could be better for them both—after their momentary outburst of love at the end—than death.

From the point of view of art, Constance is interesting. It is more than we can say of Domizia in *Luria*. She is nothing more than a passing study whom Browning uses to voice his theories. Eulalia in *A Soul's Tragedy* is also a transient thing, only she is more colourless, more a phantom than Domizia.

By this time, by the year 1846, Browning had found out that he could not write dramas well, or even such dramatic proverbs as *In a Balcony*. And he gave himself up to another species of his art. The women he now draws (some of which belong to the years during which he wrote dramas) are done separately, in dramatic lyrics as he called them, and in narrative and philosophical poems.

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Some are touched only at moments of their lives, and we are to infer from the momentary action and feeling the whole of the woman. Others are carefully and lovingly drawn from point to point in a variety of action, passion and circumstance. In these we find Browning at his best in the drawing of women. I know no women among the second-rate poets so sweetly, nobly, tenderly and wisely drawn as Pompilia and Balaustion.

## CHAPTER XIV

### *WOMANHOOD IN BROWNING*

#### *THE DRAMATIC LYRICS AND POMPILIA*

No modern poet has written of women with such variety as Browning. Coleridge, except in a few love-poems, scarcely touched them. Wordsworth did not get beyond the womanhood of the home affections, except in a few lovely and spiritual sketches of girlhood which are unique in our literature, in which maidenhood and the soul of nature so interchange their beauty that the girl seems born of the lonely loveliness of nature and lives with her mother like a child.

What motherhood in its deep grief and joy, what sisterhood and wifehood may be, have never been sung with more penetration and exquisiteness than Wordsworth sang them. But of the immense range, beyond, of womanhood he could not sing. Byron's women are mostly in love with Byron under various names, and he rarely strays beyond the woman who is loved or in love. The woman who is most vital, true and tender is Haidée in *Don Juan*. Shelley's women melt into philosophic mist, or are used to build up a political or social theory, as if they were "properties" of literature. Cythna, Rosalind, Asia, Emilia are ideas, not realities. Beatrice is alive, but she was drawn for him in the records of her trial. Even the

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woman of his later lyrics soon ceases to be flesh and blood. Keats let women alone, save in Isabella, and all that is of womanhood in her is derived from Boccaccio. Madeline is nothing but a picture. It is curious that his remarkable want of interest in the time in which he lived should be combined with as great a want of interest in women, as if the vivid life of any period in the history of a people were bound up with the vivid life of women in that period. When women awake no full emotion in a poet, the life of the time, as in the case of Keats, awakes little emotion in him. He will fly to the past for his subjects. Moreover, it is perhaps worth saying that when the poets cease to write well about women, the phase of poetry they represent, however beautiful it be, is beginning to decay. When poetry is born into a new life, women are as living in it as men. Womanhood became at once one of its dominant subjects in Tennyson and Browning. Among the new political, social, religious, philosophic and artistic ideas which were then borne like torches through England, the idea of the free development of women was also born; and it carried with it a strong emotion. They claimed the acknowledgment of their separate individuality, of their distinct use and power in the progress of the world. This was embodied with extraordinary fulness in *Aurora Leigh*, and its emotion drove itself into the work of Tennyson and Browning. How Tennyson treated the subject in the *Princess* is well known. His representation of women in his

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other poems does not pass beyond a few simple, well-known types both of good and bad women. But the particular types into which the variety of womanhood continually throws itself, the quick individualities, the fantastic simplicities and subtleties, the resolute extremes, the unconsidered impulses, the obstinate good and evil, the bold cruelties and the bold self-sacrifices, the fears and audacities, the hidden work of the thoughts and passions of women in the far-off worlds within them where their soul claims and possesses its own desires—these were beyond the power of Tennyson to describe, even, I think, to conceive. But they were in the power of Browning, and he made them, at least in lyric poetry, a chief part of his work.

In women he touched great variety, and great individuality; two things each of which includes the other, and both of which were dear to his imagination. With his longing for variety of representation, he was not content to pile womanhood up into a few classes, or to dwell on her universal qualities. He took each woman separately, marking out the points which differentiated her from, not those which she shared with, the rest of her sex. He felt that if he dwelt only on the deep-seated roots of the tree of womanhood, he would miss the endless play, fancy, movement, interaction and variety of its branches, foliage and flowers. Therefore, in his lyrical work, he leaves out for the most part the simpler elements of womanhood and draws the complex, the particular, the impulsive and the momentary. Each of his

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women is distinct from the rest. This is a great comfort in a world which, through laziness, wishes to busy itself with classes rather than with personalities. I do not believe that Browning ever met man or woman without saying to himself—Here is a new world; it may be classed, but it also stands alone. What distinguishes it from the rest—that I will know and that describe.

When women are not enslaved to conventions—and the new movement towards their freedom of development which began shortly after 1840 had enfranchised and has continued ever since to enfranchise a great number from this slavery—they are more individual and various than men are allowed to be. They carry their personal desires, aspirations and impulses into act, speech, and into extremes with much greater licence than is possible to men. One touches with them much more easily the original stuff of humanity. It was this original, Thing in women, separately individualised, on which Browning seized with delight. He did not write half as much as other poets had done of woman as being loved by man or as loving him. I have said that the mere love-poem is no main element in his work. He wrote of the original stuff of womanhood in a variety of forms, of its good and bad alike, sometimes of it as all good, as in *Pompilia*; but for the most part as mingled of good and ill, and of the good as destined to conquer the ill.

He did not exalt her above man. He thought her as vital, interesting and important for progress as man, but not more interesting, vital, or

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important. He neither lowered her nor idealised her beyond natural humanity. She stands in his poetry side by side with man on an equality of value to the present and future of mankind. And he has wrought this out not by elaborate statement of it in a theory, as Tennyson did in the *Princess* with a conscious patronage of womanhood, but by unconscious representation of it in the multitude of women whom he invented.

But though the wholes were equal, the particulars of which the wholes were composed differed in their values ; and women in his view were more keenly alive than men, at least more various in their manifestation of life. It was their intensity of life which most attracted him. He loved nothing so much as life - in plant or animal or man. His longer poems are records of the larger movement of human life, the steadfast record in quiet verse as in *Paracelsus*, or the clashing together in abrupt verse as in *Sordello*, of the turmoil and meditation, the trouble and joy of the living soul of humanity. When he, this archangel of reality, got into touch with pure fact of the human soul, beating with life, he was enchanted. And this was his vast happiness in his longest poem, the *Ring and the Book*—

Do you see this square old yellow book I toss  
I' the air, and catch again, and twirl about  
By the crumpled vellum covers— pure crude fact  
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard  
And brains, high-blooded ticked two centuries hence ?  
Give it me back The thing's restorative  
I' the touch and sight.

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But in his lyrics, it was not the steady development of life on which he loved to write, but the unexpected, original movement of life under the push of quick thought and sudden passion into some new form of action which broke through the commonplace of existence. Men and women, and chiefly women, when they spoke and acted on a keen edge of life with a precipice on either hand, or on the summit of the moment, with straight and clear intensity, and out of the original stuff of their nature—were his darling lyric subjects. And he did this work in lyrics, because the lyric is the poem of the moment.

There was one of these critical moments which attracted him greatly—that in which all after-life is contained and decided; when a step to the right or left settles, in an instant, the spiritual future of the soul. I have already mentioned some of these poems—those concerned with love, such as *By the Fireside* or *Cristina*—and the woman is more prominent in them than the man. One of the best of them, so far as the drawing of a woman is concerned, is *Dís aliter visum*. We see the innocent girl, and ten years after what the world has made of her. But the heart of the girl lies beneath the woman of the world. And she recalls to the man the hour when they lingered near the church or the cliff; when he loved her, when he might have claimed her, and did not. He feared they might repent of it; sacrificing to the present their chance of the eternities of love. "Fool! who ruined four lives—mine and your opera-dancer's,



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your own and my husband's!" Whether her outburst now be quite true to her whole self or not Browning does not let us know, but it is true to that moment of her, and it is full of the poetry of the moment she recalls. Moreover, these thirty short verses paint as no other man could have done the secret soul of a woman in society. I quote her outburst. It is full of Browning's keen poetry, and the first verse of it may well be compared with a similar moment in *By the Fireside*, where nature is made to play the same part, but succeeds as here she fails

Now I may speak you fool, for all  
Your lore! Who made things plain in vain?  
What was the sea for? What the grey  
Sad church that solitary day  
Crosses and graves and swallows' call?

Was there nought better than to enjoy?  
No feat which done would make time break  
And let us pent up creatures through  
Into eternity our due?  
No forcing earth teach heaven's employ?

No wise beginning here and now  
What cannot grow complete (earth's feat)  
And heaven must finish there and then?  
No tasting earth's true food for men  
Its sweet in sad, its sad in sweet?

No grasping at love gaining a share  
O' the sole spark from God's life at strife  
With death, so sure of range above  
The limits here? For us and love  
Failure, but when God fails despair

This you call wisdom? Thus you add  
Good unto good again, in vain?  
You loved, with body worn and weak  
I loved with faculties to seek  
'Twere both loves worthless since ill-clad?

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Let the mere star fish in his vault  
Crawl in a wash of weed indeed  
Rose-jacynth to the finger tips  
He whole in body and soul outstrips  
Man found with either in default

But what's whole can increase no more  
Is dwarfed and dies since here's its sphere  
The devil laughed at you in his sleeve  
You knew not? That I well believe  
Or you had saved two souls nay four

For Stephanie sprained last night her wrist  
Ankle or something "Pooh," cry you?  
At any rate she danced all say  
Vilely, her vogue has had its day  
Here comes my husband from his whist

Here the woman speaks for herself. It is characteristic of Browning's boldness that there are a whole set of poems in which he imagines the unexpressed thoughts which a woman revolves in self-communion under the questionings and troubles of the passions, and chiefly of the passion of love. The most elaborate of these is *James Lee's Wife*, which tells what she thinks of when after long years she has been unable to retain her husband's love. Finally she leaves him. The analysis of her thinking is interesting, but the woman is not. She is not the quick, natural woman Browning was able to paint so well when he chose. His own analytic excitement, which increases in mere intellectuality as the poem moves on, enters into her, and she thinks more through Browning the man than through her womanhood. Women are complex enough, more complex than men, but they are not complex in the fashion of this poem. Under the

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circumstances Browning has made, her thought would have been quite clear at its root, and indeed in its branches. She is represented as in love with her husband. Were she really in love, she would not have been so involved, or able to argue out her life so anxiously. Love or love's sorrow knows itself at once and altogether, and its cause and aim are simple. But Browning has unconsciously made the woman clear enough for us to guess the real cause of her departure. That departure is believed by some to be a self-sacrifice. There are folk who see self-sacrifice in everything Browning wrote about women. Browning may have originally intended her action to be one of self-sacrifice, but the thing, as he went on, was taken out of his hands, and turns out to be quite a different matter. The woman really leaves her husband because her love for him was tired out. She talks of leaving her husband free, and perhaps, in women's way, persuades herself that she is sacrificing herself; but she desires in reality to set herself free from an unavailing struggle to keep his love. There comes a time when the striving for love wearies out love itself. And James Lee's wife had reached that moment. Her departure, thus explained, is the most womanly thing in the poem, and I should not wonder if Browning meant it so. He knew what self-sacrifice really was, and thus departure of the woman was not a true self-sacrifice.

Another of these poems in which a woman speaks out her heart is *Any Wife to any Husband*.

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She is dying, and she would fain claim his undying fidelity to his love of her ; but though she believes in his love, she thinks, when her presence is not with him, that his nature will be drawn towards other women. Then what he brings her, when he meets her again, will not be perfect. Womanly to the core, and her nature is a beautiful nature, she says nothing which is not kind and true, and the picture she draws of faithfulness, without one stain of wavering, is natural and lovely. But, for all that, it is jealousy that speaks, the desire to claim all for one's self. " Thou art mine, and mine only "—that fine selfishness which injures love so deeply in the end, because it forbids its expansion, that is, forbids the essential nature of love to act. That may be pardoned unless in its extremes, during life, if the pardon does not increase it ; but this is in the hour of death, and it is unworthy of the higher world. To carry jealousy beyond the grave is a phase of that selfish passion over which this hour, touched by the larger thought of the infinite world, should have uplifted the woman. Still, what she says is in nature, and Browning's imagination has closed passionately round his subject. But he has left us with pity for the woman rather than with admiration of her.

Perhaps the subtlest part of the poem is the impression left on us that the woman knows all her pleading will be in vain, that she has fathomed the weakness of her husband's character. He will not like to remember that knowledge of hers ; and her letting him feel it is a kind of vengeance which will

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not help him to be faithful. It is also her worst bitterness, but if her womanhood were perfect, she would not have had that bitterness.

In these two poems, and in others, there is to be detected the deep-seated and quiet half-contempt—contempt which does not damage love, contempt which is half pity—whlch a woman who loves a man has for his weakness under passion or weariness. Both the wives in these poems feel that their husbands are inferior to themselves in strength of character and of intellect. To feel this is common enough in women, but is rarely confessed by them. A man scarcely ever finds it out from his own observation ; he is too vain for that. But Browning knew it. A poet sees many things, and perhaps his wife told him this secret. It was like his audacity to express it.

This increased knowledge of womanhood was probably due to the fact that Browning possessed in his wife a woman of some genius who had studied her sex in herself and in other women. It is owing to her, I think, that in so many poems the women are represented as of a finer, even a stronger intellect than the men. Many poets have given them a finer intuition ; that is a common representation. But greater intellectual power allotted to women is only to be found in Browning. The instances of it are few, but they are remarkable.

It was owing also to his wife, whose relation to him was frank on all points, that Browning saw so much more clearly than other poets into the deep, curious or remote phases of the passions, thoughts

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and vagaries of womanhood. I sometimes wonder what women themselves think of the things Browning, speaking through their mouth, makes them say ; but that is a revelation of which I have no hope, and for which, indeed, I have no desire.

Moreover, he moved a great deal in the society where women, not having any real work to do, or if they have it, not doing it, permit a greater freedom to their thoughts and impulses than those of their sex who sit at the loom of duty. Tennyson withdrew from this society, and his women are those of a retired poet—a few real types tenderly and sincerely drawn, and a few more worked out by thinking about what he imagined they would be, not by knowing them. Browning, roving through this class and other classes of society, and observing while he seemed unobserved, drew into his inner self the lives of a number of women, saw them living and feeling in a great diversity of circumstances ; and always on the watch, seized the moment into which he thought the woman entered with the greatest intensity, and smote that into a poem. Such poems, naturally lyrics, came into his head at the opera, at a ball, at a supper after the theatre, while he talked at dinner, when he walked in the park ; and they record, not the whole of a woman's character, but the vision of one part of her nature which flashed before him and vanished in an instant. Among these poems are *A Light Woman*, *A Pretty Woman*, *Solomon and Balkis*, *Gold Hair*, and, as a fine instance of this sheet-lightning poem about women—*Adam, Lilith*

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*and Eve. Too Late* and *The Worst of It* do not belong to these slighter poems ; they are on a much higher level. But they are poems of society and its secret lives. The men are foremost in them, but in each of them a different woman is sketched, through the love of the men, with a masterly decision.

Among all these women he did not hesitate to paint the types farthest removed from goodness and love. The lowest woman in the poems is she who is described in *Time's Revenges* —

So is my spirit, as flesh with sin,  
Filled full, eaten out and in  
With the lace of her, the eyes of her,  
The lips, the little chin, the stir  
Of shadow round her mouth ; and she  
I'll tell you---calmly would decree  
That I should roast at a slow fire  
If that would compass her desire  
And make her one whom they invite  
To the famous ball to-morrow night

Contrasted with this woman, from whose brutal nature civilisation has stripped away the honour and passion of the savage, the woman of *In a Laboratory* shines like a fallen angel. She at least is natural, and though the passions she feels are the worst, yet she is capable of feeling strongly. Neither have any conscience, but we can conceive that one of these women might attain it, but the other not. Both are examples of a thing I have said is exceedingly rare in Browning's poetry—men or women left without some pity of his own touched into their circumstances or character.

*In a Laboratory* is a full-coloured sketch of what

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womanhood<sup>7</sup> could become in a Court like that of Francis I. ; in which every shred of decency, gentleness and honour had disappeared. Browning's description, vivid as it is, is less than the reality. Had he deepened the colours of iniquity and indecency instead of introducing so much detailed description of the laboratory, detail which weakens though it relieves our impression of the woman, he had done better, but all the same there is no poet in England, living or dead, who could have done it so well. One of the best things in the poem is the impression made on us that it is not jealousy, but the hatred of envy which is the motive of the woman. Jealousy supposes love or the image of love, but among those who surrounded Francis, love scarcely existed at all, only lust, luxury and greed of power ; and in the absence of love and in the scorn of it, hate and envy reign unchallenged. This is what Browning has realised in this poem, and, in this differentiation, he has given us not only historical but moral truth.

Apart from these lighter and momentary poems about women there are those written out of his own ideal of womanhood, built up not only from all he knew and loved in his wife, but also out of the dreams of his heart. They are the imaginings of the high honour and affection which a man feels for noble, natural and honest womanhood. They are touched here and there by complex thinking, but for the most part are of a beloved simplicity and tenderness, and they will always be beautiful. There is the sketch of the woman in *The Italian in*



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*England*, a never-to-be-forgotten thing. It is no wonder the exile remembered her till he died. There is the image we form of the woman in *The Flower's Name*. He does not describe her ; she is far away, but her imagined character and presence fill the garden with an incense sweeter than all the flowers, and her beauty irradiates all beauty, so delicately and so plenteously does the lover's passion make her visible. There is *Evelyn Hope*, and surely no high and pure love ever created a more beautiful soul in a woman than hers who waits her lover in the spiritual world. There are those on whom we have already dwelt—Pippa, Colombe, Mildred, Guendolen. There is the woman in the *Flight of the Duchess*, not a sketch, but a completed picture. We see her, just emerged from her convent, thrilling with eagerness to see the world, believing in its beauty, interested in everything, in the movement of the leaves on the trees, of the birds in the heaven, ready to speak to every one high or low, desirous to get at the soul of all things in Nature and Humanity, herself almost a creature of the element, akin to air and fire.

She is beaten into silence, but not crushed ; overwhelmed by dry old people, by imitation of dead things, but the life in her is not slain. When the wandering gipsy claims her for a natural life, her whole nature blossoms into beauty and joy. She will have troubles great and deep, but every hour will make her conscious of more and more of life. And when she dies, it will be the beginning of an intenser life.

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Finally, there is his wife. She is painted in these lyric poems with a simplicity of tenderness, with a reticence of worship as sacred as it is fair and delicate with so intense a mingling of the ideal and the real that we never separate them, and with so much passion in remembrance of the past and in longing for the future, that no comment can enhance the picture Browning draws of her charm, her intellect and her spirit.

These pictures of womanhood were set forth before 1868 when a collected edition of his poems was published in six volumes. They were chiefly short even impressionist studies, save those in the dramas, and *Palma in Sordello*. Those in the dramas were troubled by his want of power to shape them in that vehicle. It would have then been a pity if in his matured strength, he had not drawn into clear existence, with full and careful, not impressionist work, and with unity of conception some women who should, standing alone, become permanent personages in poetry, whom men and women in the future, needing friends, should love, honour and obey, and in whom, when help and sympathy and wisdom were wanted these healing powers should be found. Browning did this for us in *Pompilia* and *Balaustion*, an Italian and a Greek girl—not an English girl. It is strange how to the very end he lived as a poet outside of his own land.

In 1868, *Pompilia* appeared before the world, and she has captured ever since the imagination, the conscience and the sentiment of all who love

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womanhood and poetry. Her character has ennobled and healed mankind. Born of a harlot, she is a star of purity, brought up by characters who love her, but who do not rise above the ordinary meanness and small commercial honesty of their class, she is always noble, generous, careless of wealth, and of a high sense of honour. It is as if Browning disdained for the time all the philosophy of heredity and environment, and indeed it was characteristic of him to believe in the sudden creation of beauty, purity and nobility out of their contraries and in spite of them. The miracle of the unrelated birth of genius—that out of the dunghill might spring the lily and out of the stratum of crime the saint—was an article of faith with him. Nature's or God's surprises were dear to him, and nothing purer, tenderer, sweeter, more natural, womanly and saintly was ever made than Pompilia, the daughter of a vagrant impurity, the child of crime, the girl who grew to womanhood in mean and vulgar circumstances.

The only hatred she earns is the hatred of Count Guido, her husband—the devil who has tortured and murdered her—the hatred of evil for good. When Count Guido, condemned to death, bursts into the unrestrained expression of his own nature, he cannot say one word about Pompilia which is not set on fire by a hell of hatred. Nothing in Browning's writing is more vivid, more intense, than these sudden outbursts of tiger fierceness against his wife. They lift and enhance the image of Pompilia.

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When she comes into contact with other characters such as the Archbishop and the Governor, men overlaid with long-deposited crusts of convention, she wins a vague pity from them, but her simplicity, naturalness and saintliness are nearly as repugnant to social convention as her goodness is to villainy; and Browning has, all through the poem, individualised in Pompilia the natural simplicity of goodness in opposition to the artificial moralities of conservative society. But when Pompilia touches characters who have any good, however hidden, in them, she draws forth that good. Her so-called parents pass before they die out of meanness into nobility of temper. Conti, her husband's cousin, a fat, waggish man of the world, changes into seriousness, pity and affection under her silent influence. The careless folk she meets on her flight to Rome recognise, even in most suspicious circumstances, her innocence and nobleness; and change at a touch their ordinary nature for a higher. And when she meets a fine character like Caponsacchi, who has been led into a worldly, immoral and indifferent life, he is swept in a moment out of it by the sight alone of this star of innocence and spiritual beauty, and becomes her true mate, duly self-excelled. The monk who receives her dying confession, the Pope, far set by his age above the noise of popular Rome, almost at one with the world beyond death, and feeling what the divine judgment would be, both recognise with a fervour which carries them beyond the prejudices of age and of their society the loveliness

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of Heaven in the spirit of this girl of seventeen years and claim her as higher than themselves.

It is fitting that to so enskyed and saintly a child, when she rests before her death, the cruel life she had led for four years should seem a dream ; and the working out of that thought, and of the two checks of reality it received in the coming of her child and the coming of Caponsacchi, is one of the fairest and most delicate pieces of work that Browning ever accomplished. She was so innocent and so simple-hearted—and the development of that part of her character in the stories told of her childhood is exquisitely touched into life—so loving, so born to be happy in being loved, that when she was forced into a maze of villainy, bound up with hatred, cruelty, baseness and guilt, she seemed to live in a mist of unreality. When the pain became too deep to be dreamlike she was mercifully led back into the dream by the approach of death. As she lay dying there, all she had suffered passed again into unreality. Nothing remained but love and purity, the thrill when first she felt her child, the prayer to God which brought Caponsacchi to her rescue so that her child might be born, and lastly the vision of perfect union hereafter with her kindred soul, who, not her lover on earth, would be her lover in eternity. Even her boy, who had brought her, while she lived, her keenest sense of reality (and Browning's whole treatment of her motherhood, from the moment she knew she was in child, till the hour when the boy lay in her arms, is as true and tender as if his wife had filled his

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soul while he wrote), even her boy fades away into the dream. It is true she was dying, and there is no dream so deep as dying. Yet it was bold of Browning, and profoundly imagined by him, to make the child disappear, and to leave the woman at last alone with the thought and the spiritual passion of her union with Caponsacchi—

O lover of my life O soldier saint,  
No work begun shall ever pause for death

It is the love of Percival's sister for Galahad.

It is not that she is naturally a dreamer, that she would not have felt and enjoyed the realities of earth. Her perceptions are keen, her nature expansive. Browning, otherwise, would not have cared for her. It was only when she was involved in evil, like an angel in hell (a wolf's arm round her throat and a snake curled over her feet), that she seemed to be dreaming, not living. It was incredible to her that such things should be reality. Yet even the dream called the hidden powers of her soul into action. In using these against evil she is not the dreamer. Her fortitude is unbroken; her moral courage never fails, though she is familiar with fear; her action, when the babe has leaped in her womb, is prompt, decisive and immediate; her physical courage, when her husband overtakes her and befools her honour, is like a man's. She seizes his sword and would have slain the villain. Then, her natural goodness, the genius of her goodness, gives her a spiritual penetration which is more than an equivalent in her for an educated

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intelligence. Her intuition is so keen that she sees through the false worldliness of Caponsacchi to the real man beneath, and her few words call it into goodness and honour for ever. Her clear sense of truth sees all the threads of the net of villainy in which she has been caught, and the only means to break through it, to reveal and bring it into condemnation. Fortitude, courage, intuition and intelligence are all made to arise out of her natural saintliness and love. She is always the immortal child.

For a time she has passed on earth through the realms of pain ; and now, stabbed to her death, she looks back on the passage, and on all who have been kind and unkind to her - on the whole of the falsehood and villainy. And the royal love in her nature is the master of the moment. She makes excuses for Violante's lie. " She meant well, and she did, as I feel now, little harm." " I am right now, quite happy ; dying has purified me of the evil which touched me, and I colour ugly things with my own peace and joy. Every one that leaves life sees all things softened and bettered." As to her husband, she finds that she has little to forgive him at the last. Step by step she goes over all he did, and even finds excuses for him, and, at the end, thus is how she speaks, a noble utterance of serene love, lofty intelligence, of spiritual power and of the forgiveness of eternity.

For that most woeful man my husband once,  
Who, needing respite still draws vital breath,  
I pardon him ? So far as lies in me,

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I give him for his good the life he takes,  
Praying the world will therefore acquiesce.  
Let him make God amends, — none, none to me  
Who thank him rather that, whereas strange fate  
Mockingly styled him husband and me wife,  
Himself this way at least pronounced divorce,  
Blotted the marriage bond : this blood of mine  
Flies forth exultingly at any door,  
Washes the parchment white, and thanks the blow  
We shall not meet in this world nor the next,  
But where will God be absent ? In His face  
Is light, but in His shadow healing too :  
Let Guido touch the shadow and be healed !  
And as my presence was importunate, —  
My earthly good temptation and a snare, —  
Nothing about me but drew somehow down  
His hate upon me — somewhat so excused  
Therefore, since hate was thus the truth of him, —  
May my evanishment for evermore  
Help further to relieve the heart that cast  
Such object of its natural loathing forth !  
So he was made ; he nowise made himself  
I could not love him, but his mother did  
His soul has never lain beside my soul  
But for the unresisting body, thanks !  
He burned that garment spotted by the flesh  
Whatever he touched is rightly ruined : plague  
It caught, and disinfection it had craved  
Still but for Guido, I am saved through him  
So as by fire, — to him thanks and farewell !

Thus, pure at heart and sound of head, a natural,  
true woman in her childhood, in her girlhood, and  
when she is tried in the fire — by nature gay,  
yet steady in suffering ; brave in a hell of fears and  
shame ; clear-sighted in entanglements of villainy ;  
resolute in self-rescue ; seeing and claiming the  
right help and directing it rightly ; rejoicing in her  
motherhood and knowing it as her crown of glory,  
though the child is from her infamous husband ;



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happy in her motherhood for one fortnight ; slain like a martyr ; loving the true man with immortal love ; forgiving all who had injured her, even her murderer ; dying in full faith and love of God, though her life had been a crucifixion ; Pompilia passes away, and England's men and women will be always grateful to Browning for her creation.

## CHAPTER XV

### BALAUSTION

AMONG the women whom Browning made, Balaustion is the crown. So vivid is her presentation that she seems with us in our daily life. And she also fills the historical imagination.

One would easily fall in love with her, like those sensitive princes in the *Arabian Nights*, who, hearing only of the charms of a princess, set forth to find her over the world. Of all Browning's women, she is the most luminous, the most at unity with herself. She has the Greek gladness and life, the Greek intelligence and passion, and the Greek harmony. All that was common, prattling, coarse, sensual and spluttering in the Greek, (and we know from Aristophanes how strong these lower elements were in the Athenian people), never shows a trace of its influence in Balaustion. Made of the finest clay, exquisite and delicate in grain, she is yet strong, when the days of trouble come, to meet them nobly and to change their sorrows into spiritual powers.

And the *mise-en-scène* in which she is placed exalts her into a heroine, and adds to her the light, colour, and humanity of Greek romance. Born at Rhodes, but of an Athenian mother, she is fourteen when the news arrives that the Athenian fleet under Nikias, sent to subdue Syracuse, has

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been destroyed, and the captive Athenians driven to labour in the quarries. All Rhodes, then in alliance with Athens, now cries, "Desert Athens, side with Sparta against Athens." Balaustion alone resists the traitorous cry. "What, throw off Athens, be disloyal to the source of art and intelligence—

to the life and light  
Of the whole world worth calling world at all!"

And she spoke so well that her kinstolk and others joined her and took ship for Athens. Now, a wind drove them off their course, and behind them came a pirate ship, and in front of them loomed the land. "Is it Crete?" they thought; "Crete, perhaps, and safety." But the oars flagged in the hands of the weary men, and the pirate gained. Then Balaustion, springing to the altar by the mast, white, rosy, and uplifted, sang on high that song of Æschylus which saved at Salamis—

' O sons of Greeks, go, set your country free,  
Free your wives, free your children, free the fanes  
O' the Gods, your fathers founded, —sepulchres  
They sleep in! Or save all, or all be lost'

The crew, impassioned by the girl, answered the song, and drove the boat on, "churning the black water white," till the land shone clear, and the wide town and the harbour, and lo, 'twas not Crete, but Syracuse, luckless fate! Out came a galley from the port. "Who are you; Sparta's friend or foe?" "Of Rhodes are we, Rhodes that has forsaken Athens!"

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"How, then, that song we heard? All Athens was in that Æschylus. Your boat is full of Athenians—back to the pirate, we want no Athenians here. . . . Yet, stay, that song was Æschylus; every one knows it—how about Euripides? Might you know any of his verses?" For nothing helped the poor Athenians so much if any of them had his mouth stored with

Old glory, great plays that had long ago  
Made themselves wings to fly about the world, —

But most of all those were cherished who could recite Euripides to Syracuse, so mighty was poetry in the ancient days to make enemies into friends, to build, beyond the wars and jealousies of the world, a land where all nations are one.

At this the captain cried. "Praise the God, we have here the very girl who will fill you with Euripides," and the passage brings Balaustion into full light.

Therefore, at mention of Euripides,  
The Captain crowed out, "Euoi, praise the God!  
Oōp, boys, bring our owl-shield to the fore!  
Out with our Sacred Anchor! Here she stands,  
Balaustion! Strangers, greet the lyric girl!  
Euripides? Babai! what a word there 'scaped  
Your teeth's enclosure, quoth my grandsire's song  
Why, fast as snow in Thrace, the voyage through,  
Had she been falling thick in flakes of him!  
Frequent as figs at Kaunos, Kaunians said.  
Balaustion, stand forth and confirm my speech!  
Now it was some whole passion of a play;  
Now, peradventure, but a honey-drop  
That slipt its comb 't the chorus. If there rose  
A star, before I could determine steer  
Southward or northward—if a cloud surprised

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Heaven, ere I fairly hollaed ' Furl the sail ! '—  
She had at fingers' end both cloud and star  
Some thought that perched there, tame and tuneable,  
Fitted with wings, and still, as off it flew,  
' So sang Euripides,' she said, ' so sang  
The meteoric poet of air and sea,  
Planets and the pale populace of heaven,  
The mind of man, and all that's made to soar ' '   
And so, although she has some other name,  
We only call her Wild-pomegranate-flower,  
Balaustion ; since, where'er the red bloom burns  
I' the dull dark verdure of the bounteous tree,  
Dethroning, in the Rosy Isle, the rose,  
You shall find food, drink odour, all at once,  
Cool leaves to bind about an aching brow,  
And never much away, the nightingale  
Sing them a strophe, with the turn-again  
Down to the verse that ends all, proverb like,  
And save us, thou Balaustion, bless the name "

And she answered : " I will recite the last play  
he wrote from first to last —*Alkestis*—his strangest,  
saddest, sweetest song."

Then because Greeks are Greeks, and hearts are hearts,  
And poetry is power, - they all outbroke  
In a great joyous laughter with much love .  
" Thank Herakles for the good holiday !  
Make for the harbour ! Row, and let voice ring,  
In we row, bringing more Euripides ! ' ' "  
All the crowd, as they lined the harbour now,  
More of Euripides ! "—took up the cry  
We landed, the whole city soon astir,  
Came rushing out of gates in common joy  
To the suburb temple, there they stationed me  
O' the topmost step, and plain I told the play,  
Just as I saw it, what the actors said,  
And what I saw, or thought I saw the while, .  
At our Kaineiros theatre, clean scooped  
Out of a hill side, with the sky above  
And sea before our seats in marble row .  
Told it, and, two days more, repeated it  
Until they sent us on our way again  
With good words and great wishes.

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So, we see Balaustion's slight figure under the blue sky, and the white temple of Herakles from the steps of which she spoke; and among the crowd, looking up to her with rapture, the wise and young Sicilian who took ship with her when she was sent back to Athens, wooed her, and found answer before they reached Piræus. And there in Athens she and her lover saw Euripides, and told the Master how his play had redeemed her from captivity. Then they were married, and one day, with four of her girl friends, under the grape-vines by the streamlet side, close to the temple, Baccheion, in the cool afternoon, she tells the tale; interweaving with the play (herself another chorus) what she thinks, how she feels concerning its personages and their doings, and in the comment discloses her character. The woman is built up in this way for us. The very excuse she makes for her inserted words reveals one side of her delightful nature—her love of poetry, her love of beauty, her seeing eye, her delicate distinction, her mingled humility and self-knowledge.

Look at Baccheion's beauty opposite,  
The temple with the pillars at the porch !  
See you not something beside masonry ?  
What if my words wind in and out the stone  
As yonder ivy, the God's parasite ?  
Though they leap all the way the pillar leads,  
Festoon about the marble, foot to frieze,  
And serpentiningly enrich the roof,  
Toy with some few bees and a bird or two,—  
What then ? The column holds the cornice up.

As the ivy is to the pillar that supports the

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cornice, so are her words to the *Alkestis* on which she comments.

That is her charming way. She also is, like Pompilia, young. But no contrast can be greater than that between Pompilia at seventeen years of age and Balaustion at fifteen. In Greece, as in Italy, women mature quickly. Balaustion is born with that genius which has the experience of age in youth and the fire of youth in age. Pompilia has the genius of pure goodness, but she is uneducated, her intelligence is untrained, and her character is only developed when she has suffered. Balaustion, on the contrary, has all the Greek capacity, a thorough education, and that education also which came in the air of that time to those of the Athenian temper. She is born into beauty and the knowledge of it into high thinking and keen feeling, and she knows well why she thought and how she felt. So finely wrought is she by passion and intelligence alike, with natural genius to make her powers tenfold, that she sweeps her kinsfolk into agreement with her, subdues the sailors to her will, enchants the captain, sings the whole crew into energy, would have, I believe, awed and enthralled the pirate, conquers the Syracusans, delights the whole city, draws a talent out of the rich man which she leaves behind her for the prisoners, is a dear friend of sombre Euripides, lures Aristophanes, the mocker, into seriousness, mates herself with him in a whole night's conversation, and wrings praise and honour from the humblest, the most cynical, and the most world-wise intellect in Athens.

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Thus, over against Pompilia, she is the image of fine culture, held back from the foolishness and vanity of culture by the steadying power of genius. Then her judgment is always balanced. Each thing to her has many sides. She decides moral and intellectual questions and action with justice, but with mercy to the wrong opinion and the wrong thing, because her intellect is clear, tolerant and forgiving through intellectual breadth and power. Pompilia is the image of natural goodness and of its power. A spotless soul, though she is passed through hell, enables her, without a trained intellect, with ignorance of all knowledge, and with as little vanity as Balaustion, to give as clear and firm a judgment of right and wrong. She is as tolerant, as full of excuses for the wrong thing, as forgiving, as Balaustion, but it is by the power of goodness and love in her, not by that of intellect. Browning never proved his strength more than when he made these two, in vivid contrast, yet in their depths in harmony; both equal, though so far apart, in noble womanhood. Both are beyond convention; both have a touch of impulsive passion, of natural wildness, of flower-beauty. Both are, in hours of crisis, borne beyond themselves, and mistress of the hour. Both mould men, for their good, like wax in their fingers. But Pompilia is the white rose, touched with faint and innocent colour; and Balaustion is the wild pomegranate flower, burning in a crimson of love among the dark green leaves of steady and sure thought, her powers latent till needed, but when called on



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and brought to light, flaming with decision and revelation

In this book we see her in her youth her powers as yet untouched by heavy sorrow. In the next, in *Aristophanes' Apology*, we first find her in matured strength, almost mastering Aristophanes; and afterwards in the depth of grief, as she flies with her husband over the seas to Rhodes, leaving behind her Athens, the city of her heart, ruined and enslaved. The deepest passion in her, the patriotism of the soul, is all but broken-hearted. Yet, she is the life and support of all who are with her, even a certain gladness breaks forth in her, and she secures for all posterity the intellectual record of Athenian life and the images, wrought to vitality, of some of the greater men of Athens. So we possess her completely. Her life, her soul, its growth and strength are laid before us. To follow her through these two poems is to follow their poetry. Whenever we touch her we touch imagination. *Aristophanes' Apology* is illuminated by Balaustion's eyes. A glimpse here and there of her enables us to thread our way without too great weariness through a thorny undergrowth of modern and ancient thought mingled together on the subject of the *Aristophanes Apology*.

In *Balaustion's Adventure* she tells her tale, and recites, as she did at Syracuse the *Alkestis* to her four friends. But she does more, she comments on it, as she did not at Syracuse. The comments are, of course, Browning's, but he means them to reveal Balaustion. They are touched throughout

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with a woman's thought and feeling, inflamed by the poetic genius with which Browning has endowed her. Balaustion is his deliberate picture of genius, the great miracle.

The story of the *Alkestis* begins before the play. Apollo, in his exile, having served King Admetos as shepherd, conceives a friendship for the king, helps him to his marriage, and knowing that he is doomed to die in early life, descends to hell and begs the Fates to give him longer life. That is a motive, holding in it strange thoughts of life and death and fate, which pleased Browning, and he treats it separately, and with sardonic humour, in the Prologue to one of his later volumes. The Fates refuse to lengthen Admetos' life, unless some one love him well enough to die for him. They must have their due at the allotted time.

The play opens when that time arrives. We see, in a kind of Prologue, Apollo leaving the house of Admetos and Death coming to claim his victim. Admetos has asked his father, mother, relations and servants to die instead of him. None will do it; but his wife, Alkestis, does. Admetos accepts her sacrifice. Her dying, her death, the sorrow of Admetos is described with all the poignant humanity of Euripides. In the meantime Herakles has come on the scene, and Admetos, though steeped in grief, conceals his wife's death and welcomes his friend to his house. As Alkestis is the heroine of self-sacrifice, Admetos is the hero of hospitality. Herakles feasts, but the indignant bearing of an old servant attracts his notice, and he

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finds out the truth. He is shocked, but resolves to attack Death himself, who is bearing away Alkestis. He meets and conquers Death and brings back Alkestis alive to her husband. So the strong man conquers the Fates, whom even Apollo could not subdue.

This is a fine subject. Every one can see in how many different ways it may be treated, with what different conceptions, how variously the characters may be built up, and what different ethical and emotional situations may be imaginatively treated in it. Racine himself thought it the finest of the Greek subjects, and began a play upon it. But he died before he finished it, and ordered his manuscript to be destroyed. We may well imagine how the quiet, stately genius of Racine would have conceived and ordered it, with the sincere passion, held under restraint by as sincere a dignity, which characterised his exalted style.

Balaustion treats it with an equal moral force, and also with that modern moral touch which Racine would have given it, which while it removed the subject at certain points from the Greek morality, would yet have exalted it into a more spiritual world than even the best of the Greeks conceived. The commentary of Balaustion is her own treatment of the subject. It professes to explain Euripides; it is in reality a fresh conception of the characters and their motives, especially of the character of Herakles. Her view of the character of Alkestis, especially in her death, is not, I think, the view which Euripides took. Her con-

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demnation of Admetos is unmodified by those other sides of the question which Euripides suggests. The position Balaustion takes up with regard to self-sacrifice is far more subtle, with its half-Christian touches than the Greek simplicity would have conceived. Finally, she feels so strongly that the subject has not been adequately conceived that, at the end she recreates it for herself. Even at the beginning she rebuilds the Euripidean matter. When Apollo and Death meet Balaustion conceives the meeting for herself. She images the divine Apollo as somewhat daunted and images the dread meeting of these two with modern not Greek imagination. It is like the meeting, she thinks, of a ruined eagle caught as he swooped in a gorge half heedless yet terrific with a lion the haunter of the gorge the lord of the ground, who pauses ere he try the worst with the frightful, unfamiliar creature, known in the shadows and silences of the sky but not known here. It is the first example we have of Balaustion's imaginative power working for itself. There is another, farther on where she stays her recitation to describe Death's rush in on Alkestis when the dialogue between him and Apollo is over

And in the fire flash of the appalling sword  
The uprush and the outburst the onslaught  
Of Death's portentous passage through the door  
Apollo stood a pitying moment space  
I caught one last bold gaze upon the night  
Nearing the world now and the God was gone  
And mortals left to deal with misery

So she speaks, as if she saw more than Euripides,  
as if to her the invisible were visible\* as it was.

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To see the eternal unseen is the dower of imagination in its loftiest mood.\*

She is as much at home with the hero of earth, the highest manhood, as she is with the gods. When Herakles comes on the scene she cannot say enough about him; and she conceives him apart from the Herakles of Euripides. She paints in him, and Browning paints through her, the idea of the full, the perfect man; and it is not the ideal of the cultivated, of the sensitive folk. It is more also a woman's than a man's ideal. For, now, suddenly, into the midst of the sorrow of the house, every one waiting, life full of penury and inactivity, there leaps the "gay cheer of a great voice," the full presence of the hero, his "weary happy face, half god, half man, which made the god-part god the more." His very voice, which smiled at sorrow, and his look, which, saying sorrow was to be conquered, proclaimed to all the world "My life is in my hand to give away, to make men glad," seemed to drive up all misery at its source, for his love of man makes him always joyful. When Admetos opened the house to him, and did not tell him of his wife's death, Balaustion comments "The hero, all truth, took him at his word, and then strode off to feast." He takes, she thought, the present rest, the physical food and drink as frankly as he took the mighty labours of his fate. And she rejoices as much in his jovial warmth, his joy in eating and drinking and singing, and festivity, as in his heroic soul. They go together, these things in a hero.

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Making the most o' the minute, that the soul  
And body, strained to height a minute since  
Might be relaxed in joy this breathing space  
For man's sake more than ever,

He slew the pest of the marish, yesterday, to  
day he takes his fill of food, wine, song and flowers,  
to-morrow he will slay another plague of man  
kind.

So she sings, praising aloud the heroic temper,  
as mighty in the natural joys of natural life, in the  
strength and honour of the body, as in the saving  
of the world from pain and evil. But this pleasure  
of the senses, though in the great nature, is in it  
under rule, and the moment Herakles hears of  
Alkestis dead, he casts aside, in "a splendour of  
resolve," the feast wine, song, and garlands, and  
girds himself to fight with Death for her rescue.  
And Balaustion, looking after him as he goes, cries  
out the judgment of her soul on all heroism. It is  
Browning's judgment also, one of the deepest things  
in his heart, a constant motive in his poetry, a  
master-thought in his life.

Gladness be with thee, Helper of our world !  
I think this is the authentic sign and seal  
Of Godship that it ever waxes glad  
And more glad until gladness blossoms bursts  
Into a rage to suffer for mankind  
And recommence at sorrow drops like seed .  
After the blossom ultimate of all  
Say does the seed scorn earth and seek the sun ?  
Surely it has no other end and aim  
Than to drop once more die into the ground  
Fast cold and darkness and oblivion there  
And thence rise tree like grow through pain to joy  
More joy and most joy —do man good again .

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That is the truth Browning makes this woman have the insight to reveal. Gladness of soul, becoming at one with sorrow and death and rising out of them the conqueror, but always rejoicing, in itself, in the joy of the universe and of God, is the root-heroic quality.

Then there is the crux of the play—Alkestis is to die for Admetos, and does it. What of the conduct of Admetos? What does Balaustion, the woman, think of that? She thinks Admetos is a poor creature for having allowed it. When Alkestis is brought dying on the stage, and Admetos follows, mourning over her, Balaustion despises him, and she traces in the speech of Alkestis, which only relates to her children's fate and takes no notice of her husband's protestations, that she has judged her husband, that love is gone in sad contempt, that all Admetos has given her is now paid for, that her death is a business transaction which has set her free to think no more about him, only of her children. For, what seems most pertinent for him to say, if he loved, "Take, O Fates, your promise back, and take my life, not hers," he does not say. That is not really the thought of Euripides.

Then, and this is subtly but not quite justly wrought into Euripides by Balaustion, she traces through the play the slow awakening of the soul of Admetos to the low-hearted thing he had done. He comes out of the house, having disposed all things duteously and fittingly round the dead, and Balaustion sees in his grave quietude that the truth is dawning on him; when suddenly Pheres,

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his father, who had refused to die for him, comes to lay his offering on the bier. This, Balaustion thinks, plucks Admetos back out of unselfish thought into that lower atmosphere in which he only sees his own advantage in the death of Alkestis, and in which he now bitterly reproaches his father because he did not die to save Alkestis. And the reproach is the more bitter because and thus Balaustion, with her subtle morality, suggests — an undernote of conscience causes him to see his own baser self, now prominent in his acceptance of Alkestis' sacrifice, finished and hardened in the temper of his father — young Admetos in old Pheres. He sees with dread and pain what he may become when old. Thus hatred of himself in his father is Balaustion thinks, the source of his extreme violence with his father. She, with the Greek sense of what was due to nature, seeks to excuse this unfitting scene. Euripides has gone too far for her. She thinks that if Sophocles had to do with the matter, he would have made the Chorus explain the man •

But the unnatural strife would not have been explained by Sophocles as Balaustion explains it. That fine ethical twist of hers "that Admetos hates himself in his father," is too modern for a Greek. It has the casuistical subtlety which the over-developed conscience of the Christian Church encouraged. It is intellectual, too, rather than real, metaphysical more than moral, Browning rather than Sophocles. Nor do I believe that a Rhodian girl, even with all Athens at the back of



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her brain, would have conceived it at all. Then Balaustion makes another comment on the situation, in which there is more of Browning than of herself. "Admetos," she says, "has been kept back by the noisy quarrel from seeing into the truth of his own conduct, as he was on the point of doing, for 'with the low strife comes the little mind.' " But when his father is gone, and Alkestis is borne away, then, in the silence of the house and the awful stillness in his own heart, he sees the truth. His shame, the whole woe and horror of his failure in love, break, like a toppling wave, upon him, and the drowned truth, so long hidden from him by self, rose to the surface, and appalled him by its dead face. His soul in seeing true, is saved, yet so as by fire. At this moment Herakles comes in, leading Alkestis, redeemed from death, and finding, so Balaustion thinks, her husband restored to his right mind.

But, then, we ask, how Alkestis, having found him fail, will live with him again, how she, having topped nobility, will endure the memory of the ignoble in him? That would be the interesting subject, and the explanation Euripides suggests does not satisfy Balaustion. The dramatic situation is unfinished. Balaustion, with her fine instinct, feels that, to save the subject, it ought to be otherwise treated, and she invents a new Admetos, a new Alkestis. She has heard that Sophocles meant to make a new piece of the same matter, and her balanced judgment, on which Browning insists so often, makes her say, "That

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is well. One thing has many sides ; but still, no good supplants a good, no beauty undoes another ; still I will love the *likest* which I know. Yet I have so drunk this poem so satisfied with it my heart and soul, that I feel as if I, too, might make a new poem on the same matter."

Al! that brave  
Bounty of poets, the one royal race  
That ever was or will be in this world !  
They give no gift that bounds itself and ends  
I' the giving and the taking — theirs so breeds  
I' the heart and soul o' the taker, so transmutes  
The man who only was a man before,  
That he grows godlike in his turn, can give—  
He also share the poet's privilege,  
Bring forth new good, new beauty, from the old.

And she gives her conception of the subject, and it further unfolds her character.

When Apollo served Admetos, the noble nature of the God so entered into him that all the beast was subdued in the man, and he became the ideal king, living for the ennoblement of his people. Yet, while doing this great work, he is to die, still young, and he breaks out, in a bitter calm, against the fate which takes him from the work of his life.

"Not so," answers Alkestis, "I knew what was coming, and though Apollo urged me not to disturb the course of things, and not to think that any death prevents the march of good or ends a life, yet he yielded ; and I die for you—all happiness."

"It shall never be," replies Admetos ; "our two lives are one. But I am the body, thou art the soul ; and the body shall go, and not the soul. I claim death."

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"No," answered Alkestis; "the active power to rule and weld the people into good is in the man. Thou art the acknowledged power. And as to the power which, thou sayest, I give thee, as to the soul of me—take it, I pour it into thee. Look at me." And as he looks, she dies, and the king is left—still twofold as before, with the soul of Alkestis in him—himself and her. So is Fate cheated, and Alkestis in Admetos is not dead. A passage follows of delicate and simple poetry, written by Browning in a manner in which I would he had oftener written. To read it is to regret that, being able to do this, he chose rather to write, from time to time, as if he were hewing his way through tangled under-wood. No lovelier image of Proserpina has been made in poetry, not even in Tennyson's *Demeter*, than this—

And even while it lay, a' the look of him  
Dead, the dimmed body, bright Alkestis' soul  
Had penetrated through the populace  
Of ghosts—was got to Koré, -throned and crowned  
The penave queen o' the twilight, where she dwells  
Forever in a muse, but half away  
From flowery earth she lost and hankers for, —  
And there demanded to become a ghost  
Before the time

Whereat the softened eyes  
Of the lost maidenhood that lingered still  
Straying among the flowers in Sicily,  
Sudden was startled back to Hades' throne  
By that demand—broke through humanity  
Into the orb'd omniscience of a God,  
Searched at a glance Alkestis to the soul  
And said . . .

"Hence, thou deceiver! This is not to die,  
It, by the very death which mocks me now,

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The life, that's left behind and past my power,  
Is formidably doubled . . ."  
And so before the embrace relaxed a whit  
The lost eyes opened still beneath the look,  
And lo Alkestis was alive again,  
And of Admetos' rapture who shall speak ?

The old conception has more reality. This is in the vague world of modern psychical imagination. Nevertheless it has its own beauty, and it enlarges Browning's picture of the character of Balaustion.

Her character is still further enlarged in *Aristophanes' Apology*. That poem, if we desire intellectual exercise, illuminated by flashings of imagination, is well worth reading, but to comprehend it fully, one must know a great deal of Athenian life and of the history of the Comic Drama. It is the defence by Aristophanes of his idea of the business, the method, and the use of Comedy. How far what he says is Browning speaking for Aristophanes, and how far it is Browning speaking for himself, is hard to tell. And it would please him to leave that purposely obscure. What is alive and intense in the poem is, first, the realisation of Athenian life in several scenes, pictured with all Browning's astonishing force of presentation, as, for instance, the feast after the play, and the grim entrance of Sophocles, black from head to foot, among the glittering and drunken revellers, to announce the death of Euripides.

Secondly, there is the presentation of Aristophanes. Browning has created him for us—

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And no ignoble presence ! On the bulge ,  
Of the clear baldness, all his head one brow —  
True the veins swelled blue network and there surged  
A red from cheek to temple —then retired  
As if the dark leaved chaplet damped a flange, —  
Was never nursed by temperance or health  
But huge the eyeballs, rolled back native fire  
Imperiously triumphant nostrils wide  
Waited then incense while the pursed mouth's pout  
Aggressive while the beak supreme above  
While the head face nay, pillared throat thrown back,  
Beard whitening under like a vinous foam  
There inle a glory of such insolence  
I thought — such domineering deity  
Hephaistos might have carved to cut the brine  
For his gay brother's prow imbrue that path  
Which purpling recognised the conqueror  
Impudent and majestic drunk perhaps  
But that's religion, sense too plainly snuffed  
Still, sensuality was grown a rite

We see the man, the natural man, to the life.  
But as the poem goes on, we company with his  
intellect and soul, with the struggle of sensual-  
ism against his knowledge of a more ideal life ;  
above all, with one, who indulging the appetites  
and senses of the natural man, is yet, at a moment,  
their master. The coarse chambers of his nature  
are laid bare, his sensuous pleasure in the lower  
forms of human life, his joy of satirising them, his  
contempt for the good or the ideal life if it throw  
the sensual man away. Then, we are made to  
know the power he has to rise above this—without  
losing it—into the higher imaginative region  
where, for the time, he feels the genius of Sopho-  
cles, of Euripides, the moral power of Balaustion,  
and the beauty of the natural world. We  
find his love of nature in his plays. Few

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of the Greeks could write with greater exquisiteness of natural beauty than this wild poet who loved the dunghill. Browning does not say this, but he records in this *Apology* how —when Aristophanes is touched for an instant by Balaustion's reading of the *Herakles*, and seizing the psalterion sings the song of Thamuris marching to his trial with the Muses through a golden autumn morning — it is the glory and loveliness of nature that he sings. This portraiture of the poet is scattered through the whole poem. It is too minute, too full of detail to dwell on here. It has a thousand touches of life and intimacy. And it is perhaps the finest thing Browning has done in portraiture of character. But then there was a certain sympathy in Browning for Aristophanes. The natural man was never altogether put aside by Browning.

Lastly, there is the fresh presentation of Balaustion, of the matured and experienced woman whom we have known as a happy girl. Euthycles and she are married and one night as she is sitting alone, he comes in, bringing the grave news that Euripides is dead, but had proved at the Court of Archelaos of Macedonia his usefulness as counsellor to King and State, and his power still to sing

Clashed thence *Alkæon* maddened *Pentheus* up  
Then music sighed itself away one moan  
Iphigenia made by Aulis' strand  
With her and music died Euripides

And Athens, hearing, ceased to mock and cried  
" Bury Euripides in Peiræos, bring his body back."  
Ah, said Balaustion, Death alters the point of view.

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But our tribute is in our hearts ; and more, his soul  
will now for ever teach and bless the world.

Is not that day come ? What if you and I  
Re sing the song inaugurating the time ?

For, like Herakles, in his own *Alkestis*, he now  
strides away (and this is the true end of the  
*Alkestis*) to surmount all heights of destiny." While she spoke thus, the Chorus of the Comedy, girls, boys, and men, in drunken revel and led by Aristophanes, thundered at the door and claimed admittance. Balaustion is drawn confronting them—tall and superb like Victory's self, her warm golden eyes flashing under her black hair, 'earth flesh with sun fire,' statuesque, searching the crowd with her glance. And one and all dissolve before her silent splendour of reproof all save Aristophanes. She bids him welcome "Glory to the Poet," she cries "Light, light I hail it everywhere, no matter for the murk that never should have been such orb's associate." Aristophanes changes as he sees her, a new man confronts her

'So!' he smiled, piercing to my thought at once,  
'You see myself?' Balaustion's fixed regard  
Can strip the proper Aristophanes  
Of what our sophists in their jargon style  
His accidents?"

He confesses her power to meet him in discourse, unfolds his views and plans to her, and having contrasted himself with Euripides, bids her use her thrice-refined refinement, her rosy strength, to match his argument. She claims no equality, with him, the consummate creator, but only, as a

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woman, the love of all things lovable with which to meet him who has degraded Comedy. She appeals to the high poet in the man, and finally bids him honour the deep humanity in Euripides. To prove it, and to win his accord, she reads the *Herakles*, the last of Euripides.

It is this long night of talk which Balaustion dictates to Euthycles as she is sailing, day after day, from Athens back to Rhodes. The aspect of sea and sky, as they sail, is kept before us, for Balaustion uses its changes as illustrations, and the clear descriptions tell, even more fully than before, how quick this woman was to observe natural beauty and to correlate it with humanity. Here is one example. In order to describe a change in the temper of Aristophanes from wild license to momentary gravity, Balaustion seizes on a cloud-incident of the voyage—Euthycles, she cries,

“ o’er the boat side quick what change  
Watch—in the water ! But a second since  
It laughed a ripply spread of sun and sea  
Rav’ fused with wave to never disunite  
Now sudden all the surface hard and black  
Lies a quenched light dead motion—what the cause ?  
Look up and lo the menace of a cloud  
Has solemnised the sparkling spoiled the sport !  
Just so some overshadow some new care  
Stopped all the mirth and mocking on his face ” .

Her feeling for nature is as strong as her feeling for man, and both are woven together.

All her powers have now ripened, and the last touch has been given to them by her ideal sorrow for Athens, the country of her soul, where high



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intelligence and imagination had created worlds. She leaves it now, ruined and degraded, and the passionate outbreak of her patriotic sorrow with which the poem opens lifts the character and imagination of Balaustion into spiritual splendour. Athens, "hearted in her heart," has perished ignobly. Not so she thinks, ought this beauty of the world to have died, its sea walls razed to the ground to the fluting and singing of harlots, but in some vast overwhelming of natural energies—in the embrace of fire to join the gods, or in a sundering of the earth, when the Acropolis should have sunken entire and risen in Hades to console the ghosts with beauty, or in the multitudinous over-swarming of ocean. Thus she could have borne, but, thinking of what has been, of the misery and disgrace, 'Oh' she cries "bear me away—wind, wave and bark!" But Browning does not leave Balaustion with only this deep emotion in her heart. He gives her the spiritual passion of genius. She is swept beyond her sorrow into that invisible world where the soul lives with the gods, with the pure Ideas of justice, truth and love, where immortal life awaits the disembodied soul and we shall see Euripides. In these high thoughts she will outlive her sorrow.

Why should despair be? Since distinct above  
Man's wickedness and folly floats the wind  
And floats the cloud-free transport for our soul  
Out of its fleshly distance dim and low—  
Since disembodied soul anticipates  
(Thought borne as now in rapturous unrestraint)  
Above all crowding crystal silentness,

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Above all noise, a silver solitude —  
Surely, where thought so bears soul, soul in time  
May permanently bide, "assert the wise,"  
There live in peace, there work in hope once more —  
O nothing doubt, Philemon! Greed and strife,  
Hatred and cark and care, what place have they  
In yon blue liberality of heaven?  
How the seahelps! How rose-smit earth will rise  
Breast-high thence, some bright morning, and be  
Rhodes!

Heaven, earth and sea, my warrant—in their name,  
Believe—o'er falsehood, truth is surely sphered,  
O'er ugliness beams beauty, o'er this world  
Extends that realm where "as the wise assert"  
Philemon, thou shalt see Euripides  
Clearer than mortal sense perceived the man!

We understand that she has drunk deep of Socrates, that her spiritual sense reached onward to the Platonic Socrates. In this supersensuous-world of thought she is quieted out of the weakness which made her miserable over the fall of Athens; and in the quiet, Browning, who will lift his favourite into perfectness, adds to her spiritual imagination the dignity of that moral judgment which the intellect of genius gathers from the facts of history. In spite of her sorrow, she grasps the truth that there was justice in the doom of Athens. Let justice have its way. Let the folk die who pulled her glory down. This is her prophetic strain, the strength of the Hebrew in the Greek.

And then the prophet in the woman passes, and the poet in her takes the lyre. She sees the splendid sunset. Why should its extravagance of glory run to waste? Let me build out of it a new Athens, quarry out the golden clouds and raise the Acropolis, and the rock-hewn Place of Assembly, whence

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new orators may thunder over Greece; and the theatre where Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, god-like still, may contend for the prize. Yet—and there is a further change of thought—yet that may not be. To build that poetic vision is to slip away from reality, and the true use of it. ‘The tragedy is there—irrevocable. Let it sink deep in us till we see Rhodes shining over the sea. So great, so terrible, so piteous it is, that, dwelt on in the soul and seen in memory, it will do for us what the great tragedians made their tragic themes do for their hearers. It will purify the heart by pity and terror from the baseness and littleness of life. Our small hatreds, jealousies and prides, our petty passions will be rebuked, will seem nothing in its mighty sorrow.

What else in life seems piteous any more  
After such pity, or proves terrible  
Beside such terror,

Thus is the woman—the finest creature Browning drew, young and fair and stately, with her dark hair and amber eyes, lovely—the wild pomegranate flower of a girl—as keen, subtle and true of intellect as she is lovely, able to comment on and check Euripides, to conceive a new play out of his subject, to be his dearest friend, to meet on equality Aristophanes; so full of lyric sympathy, so full of eager impulse that she thrills the despairing into action, enslaves a city with her eloquence, charms her girl-friends by the Ilissus, and so sends her spirit into her husband that, when the Spartans advise

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the razing of Athens to the ground he saves the city by those famous lines of Euripides, of which Milton sang ; so at one with natural beauty, with all beauty, that she makes it live in the souls of men ; so clear in judgment that she sees the right even when it seems lost in the wrong, that she sees the justice of the gods in the ruin of the city she most loved ; so poetic of temper that everything speaks to her of life, that she acknowledges the poetry which rises out of the foulness she hates in Aristophanes, that she loves all humanity, bad or good, and Euripides chiefly because of his humanity ; so spiritual, that she can soar out of her most overwhelming sorrow into the stormless world where the gods breathe pure thought and for ever love ; and, abiding in its peace, use the griefs of earth for the ennoblement of the life of men, because in all her spiritual apartness, however far it bear her from earth, she never loses her close sympathy with the fortunes of mankind. Nay from her lofty station she is the teacher of truth and love and justice, in splendid prophecy. It is with an impassioned exaltation, worthy of Sibyl and Pythoness in one, of divine wisdom both Roman and Greek, that she cries to the companions of her voyage words which embody her soul and the soul of all the wise and loving of the earth, when they act for men ; bearing their action, thought and feeling beyond man to God in man--

Speak to the infinite intelligence,  
Sing to the everlasting sympathy !

## CHAPTER XVI

### *THE RING AND THE BOOK*

WHEN Browning published *The Ring and the Book* he was nearly fifty years old. All his powers (except those which create the lyric) are used therein with mastery, and the ease with which he writes is not more remarkable than the exultant pleasure which accompanies the ease. He has, as an artist, a hundred tools in hand, and he uses them with certainty of execution. The wing of his invention does not falter through these twelve books, nor droop below the level at which he began them; and the epilogue is written with as much vigour as the prologue. The various books demand various powers. In each book the powers are proportionate to the subject, but the mental force behind each exercise of power is equal throughout. He writes as well when he has to make the guilty soul of Guido speak, as when the innocence of Pompilia tells her story. The gain-serving lawyers, each distinctly isolated, tell their worldly thoughts as clearly as Caponsacchi reveals his redeemed and spiritualised soul. The parasite of an aristocratic and thoughtless society in *Fertum Quid* is not more vividly drawn than the Pope, who has left in his old age the conventions of society behind him, and speaks in his silent chamber face to face with God. And all the minor characters—of whom there are a

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great number, ranging from children to old folk, from the peasant to the Cardinal, through every class of society in Italy—are drawn, even when they are slashed out in only three lines, with such force, certainty, colour and life that we know them better than our friends. The variousness of the product would seem to exclude an equality of excellence in drawing and invention. But it does not. It reveals and confirms it. The poem is a miracle of intellectual power.

This great length, elaborate detail, and the repetition so many times of the same story, would naturally suggest to an intending reader that the poem might be wearisome. Browning, suspecting this, and in mercy to a public who does not care for a work of *longue haleine*, published it at first in four volumes, with a month's interval between each volume. He thought that the story told afresh by characters widely different would strike new, if each book were read at intervals of ten days. There were three books in each volume. And if readers desire to realise fully the intellectual *tour de force* contained in telling the same story twelve times over, and making each telling interesting, they cannot do better than read the book as Browning wished it to be read. "Give the poem four months and let ten days elapse between the reading of each book," is what he meant us to understand. Moreover, to meet this possible weariness, Browning, consciously, or probably unconsciously, since genius does the right thing without asking why, continually used a trick of his own which, at intervals,

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stings the reader into wakefulness and pleasure, and sends him on to the next page refreshed and happy. After fifty, or it may be a hundred lines of somewhat dry analysis, a vivid illustration, which concentrates all the matter of the previous lines, flashes on the reader as a snake might flash across a traveller's dusty way: or some sudden description of an Italian scene in the country or in the streets of Rome enlivens the well-known tale with fresh humanity. Or a new character leaps up out of the crowd, and calls us to note his ways, his dress, his voice, his very soul in some revealing speech, and then passes away from the stage, while we turn, refreshed (and indeed at times we need refreshment), to the main speaker, the leading character.

But to dwell on the multitude of portraits with which Browning's keen observation, memory and love of human nature have embellished *The Ring and the Book* belongs to another part of this chapter. At present the question rises: "What place does *The Ring and the Book* hold in Browning's development?" It holds a central place. There was always a struggle in Browning between two pleasures; pleasure in the exercise of his intellect—his wit, in the fullest sense of the word; pleasure in the exercise of his poetic imagination. Sometimes one of these had the upper hand in his poems, sometimes the other, and sometimes both happily worked together. When the exercise of his wit had the upper hand, it tended to drive out both imagination and passion. Intellectual play may

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be without any emotion except its delight in itself. Then its mere cleverness attracts its user, and gives him an easily purchased pleasure. When a poet falls a complete victim to this pleasure, imagination hides her face from him, passion runs away, and what he produces resembles, but is not, poetry. And Browning, who had got perilously near to the absence of poetry in *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, succeeded in *Mr. Sludge, the Medium*, in losing poetry altogether. In *The Ring and the Book* there are whole books, and long passages in its other books in which poetry almost ceases to exist and is replaced by brilliant cleverness, keen analysis, vivid description, and a combination of wit and fancy which is rarely rivalled ; but no emotion, no imagination such as poets use inflames the coldness of these qualities into the glow of poetry. The indefinable difference which makes imaginative work into poetry is not there. There is abundance of invention ; but that, though a part of imagination, belongs as much to the art of prose as to the art of poetry.

Browning could write thus, out of his intellect alone. None of the greater poets could. Their genius could not work without fusing into their intellectual work intensity of feeling ; and that combination secured poetic treatment of their subject. It would have been totally impossible for Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, Vergil, or even the great mass of second-rate poets, to have written some of Browning's so-called poetry—no matter how they tried. There was that in Browning's nature which



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enabled him to exercise his intellectual powers alone, without passion, and so far he almost ceases to deserve the name of poet. And his pleasure in doing this grew upon him, and having done it with dazzling power in part of *The Ring and the Book*, he was carried away by it, and produced a number of so-called poems; terrible examples of what a poet can come to when he has allowed his pleasure in clever analysis to tyrannise over him—*Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, *The Inn Album*, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, and a number of shorter poems in the volumes which followed. In these, what Milton meant by passion, simplicity and sensuousness were banished, and imagination existed only as it exists in a prose writer.

This condition was slowly arrived at. It had not been fully reached when he wrote *The Ring and the Book*. His poetic powers resisted their enemies for many years, and had the better in the struggle. If it takes a long time to cast a devil out, it takes a longer time to depose an angel. And the devil may be utterly banished, but the angel never. And though the devil of mere wit and the little devils of analytic exercise—devils when they usurp the throne in a poet's soul and enslave imaginative emotion—did get the better of Browning, it was only for a time. Towards the end of his life he recovered, but never as completely as he had once possessed them, the noble attributes of a poet. The evils of the struggle clung to him; the poisonous pleasure they had pursued still affected him;

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he was again and again attacked by the old malaria. He was as a brand plucked from the burning.

*The Ring and the Book* is the central point of this struggle. • It is full of emotion and thought concentrated on the subject, and commingled by imagination to produce beauty. And whenever this is the case, as in the books which treat of Caponsacchi and Pompilia, we are rejoiced by poetry. In their lofty matter of thought and feeling, in their simplicity and nobleness of spiritual beauty, poetry is dominant. In them also his intellectual powers, and his imaginative and passionate powers, are fused into one fire. Nor is the presentation of Guido Franceschini under two faces less powerful, or that of the Pope, in his meditative silence. But in these books the poetry is less, and is mingled, as would naturally indeed be the case, with a searching analysis, which intrudes too much into their imaginative work. Over-dissection makes them cold. In fact, in fully a quarter of this long poem, the analysing understanding, that bustling and self-conscious person, who plays only on the surface of things and separates their elements from one another instead of penetrating to their centre ; who is incapable of seeing the whole into which the various elements have combined—is too masterful for the poetry. It is not, then, imaginative, but intellectual pleasure which, as we read, we gain.

Then again there is throughout a great part of the poem a dangerous indulgence of his wit, the amusement of remote analogies ; the use of far-fetched illustrations ; quips and cranks and wanton

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wiles of the reasoning fancy in deviating self-indulgence ; and an allusiveness which sets commentators into note-making effervescence. All these, and more, which belong to wit,\*are often quite ungoverned, allowed to disport themselves as they please. Such matters delight the unpoetic readers of Browning, and indeed they are excellent entertainment. But let us call them by their true name ; let us not call them poetry, nor mistake their art for the art of poetry. Writing them in blank verse does not make them poetry. In *Half-Rome*, in *The Other Half-Rome*, and in *Tertium Quid*, these elements of analysis and wit are exhibited in three-fourths of the verse ; but the other fourth—in description of scenes, in vivid portraiture, in transient outbursts out of which passion, in glimpses, breaks —rises into the realm of poetry. In the books which sketch the lawyers and their pleadings, there is wit in its finest brilliancy, analysis in its keenest veracity, but they are scarcely a poet's work. The whole book is then a mixed book, extremely mixed. All that was poetical in Browning's previous work is represented in it, and all the unpoetical elements which had gradually been winning power in him, and which showed themselves previously in *Bishop Blougram* and *Mr. Sludge*, are also there in full blast. It was, as I have said, the central battlefield of two powers in him. And when *The Ring and the Book* was finished, the inferior power had for a time the victory.

To sum up then, There are books in the poem

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where matter of passion and matter of thought are imaginatively wrought together. There are others where psychological thought and metaphysical reasoning are dominant, but where passionate feeling has also a high place. There are others where analysis and wit far excel the elements of imaginative emotion; and there are others where every kind of imagination is absent, save that which is consistent throughout and which never fails—the power of creating men and women into distinct individualities. That is left, but it is a power which is not special to a poet. A prose writer may possess it with the same fulness as a poet. Carlyle had it as remarkably as Browning, or nearly as remarkably. He also had wit—a heavier wit than Browning's, less lambent, less piercing, but as forcible.

One thing more may be said. The poem is far too long, and the subject does not bear its length. The long poems of the world (I do not speak of those by inferior poets) have a great subject, are concerned with manifold fates of men, and are naturally full of various events and varied scenery. They interest us with new things from book to book. In *The Ring and the Book* the subject is not great, the fates concerned are not important, and the same event runs through twelve books and is described twelve times. However we may admire the intellectual force which actually makes the work interesting, and the passion which often thrills us in it—this is more than the subject bears, and than we can always endure. Each book is spun

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out far beyond what is necessary ; a great deal is inserted which would be wisely left out. No one could be more concise than Browning when he pleased. His power of flashing a situation or a thought into a few words is well known. But he did not always use this power. And in *The Ring and the Book*, as in some of the poems that followed it, he seems now and then to despise that power.

And now for the poem itself. Browning tells the story eight times by different persons, each from a different point of view, and twice more by the same person before and after his condemnation, and, of course, from two points of view. Then he practically tells it twice more in the prologue and the epilogue—twelve times in all—and in spite of what I have said about the too great length of the poem, this is an intellectual victory that no one else but Browning could have won against its difficulties. Whether it was worth the creation by himself of the difficulty is another question. He chose to do it, and we had better submit to him and get the good of his work. At least we may avoid some of the weariness he himself feared by reading it in the way I have mentioned, as Browning meant it to be read. Poems—being the highest product of the highest genius of which man is capable—ought to be approached with some reverence. And a part of that reverence is to read them in accordance with the intention and desire of the writer.

We ought not to forget the date of the tale when we read the book. It is just two hundred years ago. The murder of Pompilia took place in 1698 ;

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and the book completes his studies of the Renaissance in its decay. If *Sordello* is worth our careful reading as a study of the thirteenth century in North Italy, this book is as valuable as a record of the society of its date. It is, in truth, a mine of gold; pure crude ore is secreted from man's life, then moulded into figures of living men and women by the insight and passion of the poet. In it is set down Rome as she was—her customs, opinions, classes of society; her dress, houses, streets, lanes, byeways and squares; her architecture, fountains, statues, courts of law, convents, gardens; her fashion and its drawing-rooms, the various professions and their habits, high life and middle class, tradesmen and beggars, priest, friar, lay-ecclesiastic, cardinal and Pope. Nowhere is this pictorial and individualising part of Browning's genius more delighted with its work. Every description is written by a lover of humanity, and with joy.

Nor is he less vivid in the *mise-en-scène* in which he places this multitude of personages. In *Half-Rome* we mingle with the crowd between Palazzo Fiano and Ruspoli, and pass into the church of Lorénzo in Lucina where the murdered bodies are exposed. The mingled humours of the crowd, the various persons and their characters are combined with and enhanced by the scenery. Then there is the Market Place by the Capucin convent of the Piazza Barberini, with the fountains leaping; then the *Réunion* at a palace, and the fine fashionable folk among the mirrors and the chandeliers, each with their view of the question; then the Court-

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house, with all its paraphernalia, where Guido and Caponsacchi plead ; then, the sketches, as new matters turn up, of the obscure streets of Rome, of the country round Arezzo, of Arezzo itself, of the post road from Arezzo to Rome and the country inn near Rome, of the garden house in the suburbs, of the households of the two advocates and their different ways of living ; of the Pope in his closet and of Guido in the prison cell ; and last, the full description of the streets and the Piazza del Popolo on the day of the execution— all with a hundred vivifying, illuminating, minute details attached to them by this keen-eyed, observant, questing poet who remembered everything he saw, and was able to use each detail where it was most wanted. Memories are good, but good usage of them is the fine power. The *mise-en-scène* is then excellent, and Browning was always careful to make it right, fitting and enlivening. Nowhere is this better done than in the Introduction where he finds the book on a stall in the Square of San Lorenzo, and describes modern Florence in his walk from the Square past the Strozzi, the Pillar and the Bridge to Casa Guidi on the other side of the Arno opposite the little church of San Felice. During the walk he read the book through, yet saw everything he passed by. The description will show how keen were his eyes, how masterly his execution.

That memorable day,

(June was the month, Lorenzo named the Square)

I leaned a little and overlooked my prize

By the low railing round the fountain-source

Closè to the statue, where a step descends :

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While clinked the cans of copper, as stooped and rose  
Thick-ankled girls who brimmed them, and made place  
For marketmen glad to pitch basket down,  
Dip a broad melon-leaf that holds the wet,  
And wash their faded fresh. And on I read  
Presently, though my path grew perilous  
Between the outspread straw-work, piles of plait  
Soon to be flapping, each o'er two black eyes  
And swathe of Tuscan hair, on festas fine :  
Through fire-irons, tribes of tongs, shovels in sheaves,  
Skeleton bedsteads, wardrobe-drawers agape,  
Rows of tall slim brass lamps with dangling gear, —  
And worse, cast clothes a-sweetening in the sun :  
None of them took my eye from off my prize.  
Still read I on, from written title page  
To written index, on, through street and street,  
At the Strozzi, at the Pillar, at the Bridge ;  
Till, by the time I stood at home again  
In Casa Guidi by Felice Church,  
Under the doorway where the black begins  
With the first stone-slab of the staircase cold,  
I had mastered the contents, knew the whole truth  
Gathered together, bound up in this book,  
Print three-fifths, written supplement the rest.

This power, combined with his power of portraiture, makes this long poem alive. No other man of his century could paint like him the to and fro of a city, the hurly-burly of humanity, the crowd, the movement, the changing passions, the loud or quiet clash of thoughts, the gestures, the dress, the interweaving of expression on the face, the whole play of humanity in war or peace. As we read, we move with men and women ; we are pressed everywhere by mankind. We listen to the sound of humanity, sinking sometimes to the murmur we hear at night from some high window in London ; swelling sometimes, as in *Sordello*, into a roar of violence, wrath, revenge, and war. • And



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it was all contained in that little body, brain and heart ; and given to us, who can feel it, but not give it. This is the power which above all endears him to us as a poet. We feel in each poem not only the waves of the special event of which he writes, but also the large vibration of the ocean of humanity.

He was not unaware of this power of his. We are told in *Sordello* that he dedicated himself to the picturing of humanity ; and he came to think that a Power beyond ours had accepted this dedication, and directed his work. He declares in the introduction that he felt a Hand ("always above my shoulder—mark the predestination"), that pushed him to the stall where he found the fated book in whose womb lay his child —*The Ring and the Book*. And he believed that he had certain God-given qualities which fitted him for this work. These he sets forth in this introduction, and the self-criticism is of the greatest interest.

The first passage is, when he describes how, having finished the book and got into him all the gold of its fact, he added from himself that to the gold which made it workable—added to it his live soul, informed, transpierced it through and through with imagination ; and then, standing on his balcony over the street, saw the whole story from the beginning shape itself out on the night, alive and clear, not in dead memory but in living movement ; saw right away out on the Roman road to Arezzo, and all that there befell ; then passed to Rome again, with the actors in the tragedy, a presence

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with them who heard them speak and think and act. The "life in him" abolished the death of things—deep calling unto deep." For "a spirit laughed and leaped through his every limb, and lit his eye, and lifted him by the hair, and let him have his will" with Pompilia, Guido, Caponsacchi, the lawyers, the Pope, and the whole of Rome. And they rose from the dead; the old woe stepped on the stage again at the magician's command; and the rough gold of fact was rounded to a ring by art. But the ring should have a posy, and he makes that in a passionate cry to his dead wife—a lovely spell where high thinking and full feeling meet and mingle like two deep rivers. Whoso reads it feels how her spirit, living still for him, brooded over and blest his masterpiece:

O lyric Love, half angel and half bird  
And all a wonder and a wild desire,—  
Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun,  
Took sanctuary within the holier blue,  
And sang a kindred soul out to his face,—  
Yet human at the red-ripe of the heart—  
When the first summons from the darkling earth  
Reached thee amid thy chambers, blanched their blue,  
And bared them of the glory—to drop down,  
To toil for man, to suffer or to die,—  
This is the same voice can thy soul know change  
Hail then, and hearken from the realms of help!  
Never may I commence my song, my due  
To God who best taught song by gift of thee,  
Except with bent head and beseeching hand—  
That still, despite the distance and the dark,  
What was, again may be, some interchange  
Of grace, some splendour once thy very thought,  
Some benediction anciently thy smile.  
—Never conclude, but raising hand and head  
Thither where eyes, that cannot reach, yet yearn

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For all hope, all sustainment, all reward,  
Their utmost up and on,—so blessing back  
In those thy realms of help, that heaven thy home,  
Some whiteness which, I judge, thy face makes proud,  
Some wanness where, I think, thy foot may fall!

The poem begins with the view that one half of Rome took of the events. At the very commencement we touch one of the secondary interests of the book, the incidental characters. Guido, Caponsacchi, Pompilia, the Pope, and, in a lesser degree, Violante and Pietro, are the chief characters, and the main interest contracts around them. But, through all they say and do, as a motley crowd through a street, a great number of minor characters move to and fro; and Browning, whose eye sees every face, and through the face into the soul, draws them one by one, some more fully than others in perhaps a hundred lines, some only in ten. Most of them are types of a class, a profession or a business, yet there is always a touch or two which isolates each of them so that they do not only represent a class but a personal character. He hated, like Morris, the withering of the individual, nor did he believe, nor any man who knows and feels mankind, that by that the world grew more and more. The poem is full of such individualities. It were well, as one example, to read the whole account of the people who come to see the murdered bodies laid out in the Church of Lorenzo. The old, curious, doddering Gossip of the Roman street is not less alive than the Cardinal, and the clever pushing Curato; and around them are heard the buzz of talk, the movement of the

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crowd. The church, the square are humming with humanity.

He does the same clever work at the deathbed of Pompilia. She lies in the House of the dying, and certain folk are allowed to see her. Each one is made alive by this creative pencil; and all are different, one from the other--the Augustinian monk, old mother Baldi chattering like a jay who thought that to touch Pompilia's bedclothes would cure her palsy, Cavalier Carlo who fees the porter that he may paint her face, just because she was murdered and famous, the folk who argue on theology over her wounded body. Elsewhere we possess the life-history of Pietro and Violante, Pompilia's reputed parents; several drawings of the retired tradesmen class, with their gossips and friends, in the street of a poor quarter in Rome; then, the Governor and Archbishop of Arezzo, the friar who is kindly, but fears the world and all the busy-bodies of this provincial town. Arezzo, its characters and indwellers, stand in clear light. The most vivid of these sketches is Dominus Hyacinthus, the lawyer who defends Guido. I do not know anything better done, and more amusingly, than this man and his household--a paternal creature, full of his boys and their studies, making us, in his garrulous pleasure, at home with them and his fat wife. Browning was so fond of this sketch that he drew him and his boys over again in the epilogue.

These represent the episodical characters in this drama of life; and Browning has scattered them, as

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it were, behind the chief characters, whom sometimes they illustrate and sometimes they contrast. Of these the whitest, simplest, loveliest is Pompilia, of whom I have already written. The other chief characters are Count Guido and Giuseppe Caponsacchi; and to the full development of these two characters Browning gives all his powers. They are contrasted types of the spirit of good and the spirit of evil conquering in man. Up to a certain point in life their conduct is much alike. Both belong to the Church—one as a priest, one as a layman affiliated to the Church. The lust of money and self, when the character of Pompilia forces act, turns Guido into a beast of greed and hate. The same character, when it forces act, lifts Caponsacchi into almost a saint. This was a piece of contrasted psychology in which the genius of Browning revelled, and he followed all the windings of it in both these hearts with the zest of an explorer. They were labyrinthine, but the more labyrinthine the better he was pleased. Guido's first speech is made before the court in his defence. We see disclosed the outer skin of the man's soul, all that he would have the world know of him—cynical, mocking, not cruel, not affectionate, a man of the world whom life had disappointed, and who wishing to establish himself in a retired life by marriage had been deceived and betrayed, he pleads, by his wife and her parents—an injured soul who, stung at last into fury at having a son foisted on him, vindicates his honour. And in this vindication his hypocrisy slips at intervals from him,

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because his hatred of his wife is too much for his hypocrisy.

This is the only touch of the wolf in the man—his cruel teeth shown momentarily through the smooth surface of his defence. A weaker poet would have left him there, not having capacity for more. But Browning, so rich in thought he was, had only begun to draw him. Guido is not only painted by three others—by Caponsacchi, by Pompilia, by the Pope—but he finally exposes his real self with his own hand. He is condemned to death. Two of his friends visit him the night before his execution, in his cell. Then, exalted into eloquence by the fierce passions of fear of death and hatred of Pompilia, he lays bare as the night his very soul, mean, cruel, cowardly, hungry for revenge, crying for life, black with hate—a revelation such as in literature can best be paralleled by the soliloquies of Iago. Baseness is supreme in his speech, hate was never better given; the words are like the gnashing of teeth; prayers for life at any cost were never meaner, and the outburst of terror and despair at the end is their ultimate expression.

Over against him is set Caponsacchi, of noble birth, of refined manner, one of those polished and cultivated priests of whom Rome makes such excellent use, and of whom Browning had drawn already a different type in Bishop Blougram. He hesitated, being young and gay, to enter the Church. But the archbishop of that easy time, two hundred years ago, told him the Church was strong enough to bear a few light priests, and that he would be set

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free from many ecclesiastical duties if, by assiduity in society and with women, he strengthened the social weight of the Church. In that way, making his madrigals and confessing fine ladies, he lived for four years. This is an admirable sketch of a type of Church society of that date, indeed, of any date in any Church ; it is by no means confined to Rome.

On this worldly, careless, indifferent, pleasure-seeking soul, Pompilia, in her trouble and the pity of it, rises like a pure star seen through mist that opens at intervals to show her excelling brightness ; and in a moment, at the first glimpse of her in the theatre, the false man drops away ; his soul breaks up, stands clear, and claims its divine birth. He is born again, and then transfigured. The life of convention, of indifference, dies before Pompilia's eyes ; and on the instant he is true to himself, to her, and to God. The fleeting passions which had absorbed him, and were of the senses, are burned up, and the spiritual love for her purity, and for purity itself—that eternal, infinite desire—is now master of his life. Not as Miranda and Ferdinand changed eyes in youthful love, but as Dante and Beatrice look on one another in Paradise, did Pompilia and Caponsacchi change eyes, and know at once that both were true, and see without speech the central worth of their souls. They trusted one another and they loved for ever. So, when she cried to him in her distress, he did her bidding and bore her away to Rome. He tells the story of their flight, and tells it with extraordinary beauty and vehemence in her defence. So noble is the tale that he convinces the

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judges who at first had disbelieved him ; and the Pope confesses that his imprudence was a higher good than priestly prudence would have been. When he makes his defence he has heard that Pompilia has been murdered. Then we understand that in his conversion to goodness he has not lost but gained passion. Scorn of the judges, who could not see that neither he was guilty nor Pompilia ; fiery indignation with the murderer ; infinite grief for the lamb slain by the wolf, and irrevocable love for the soul of Pompilia, whom he will dwell with eternally when they meet in Heaven, a love which Pompilia, dying, declares she has for him, and in which, growing and abiding, she will wait for him burn on his lips. He is fully and nobly a man ; yet, at the end—and he is no less a man for it—the wild sorrow at his heart breaks him down into a cry :

O great, just, good God ! Miserable me !

Pompilia ends her words more quietly, in the faith that comes with death. Caponsacchi has to live on, to bear the burden of the world. But Pompilia has borne all she had to bear. All pain and horror are behind her, as she lies in the stillness, dying. And in the fading of this life, she knows she loves Caponsacchi in the spiritual world and will love him for ever. Each speaks according to the circumstance, but she most nobly :

He is ordained to call and I to come !

Do not the dead wear flowers when dressed for God ?

Say,—I am all in flowers from head to foot !

Say,—not one flower of all he said and did,



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Might seem to flit unnoticed, fade unknown,  
But dropped a seed, has grown a balsam-tree  
Whereof the blossoming perfumes the place  
At this supreme of moments! He is a priest;  
He cannot marry therefore, which is right;  
I think he would not marry if he could  
Marriage on earth seems such a counterfeit,  
Mere imitation of the inimitable  
In heaven we have the real and true and sure  
'Tis there they neither marry nor are given  
In marriage but are as the angels—right,  
Oh how right that is, how like Jesus Christ  
To say that! Marriage-making for the earth,  
With gold so much—birth, power, repute so much  
Or beauty, youth so much, in lack of these!  
Be as the angels rather, who, apart,  
Know themselves into one, are found at length  
Married, but marry never, no, nor give  
In marriage, they are man and wife at once  
When the true time is—here we have to wait  
Not so long neither! Could we by a wish  
Have what we will and get the future now,  
Would we wish aught done undone in the past?  
So, let him wait God's instant men call years,  
Meantime hold hard by truth and his great soul,  
Do out the duty! Through such souls alone  
God stooping shows sufficient of His light  
For us in the dark to rise by—And I rise

Last of these main characters, the Pope appears. Guido, condemned to death by the law, appeals from the law to the head of the Church, because, being half an ecclesiastic, his death can only finally be decreed by the ecclesiastical arm. An old, old man, with eyes clear of the quarrels, conventions, class prejudices of the world the Pope has gone over all the case during the day, and no night has fallen. Far from the noise of Rome, removed from the passions of the chief characters, he is sitting in the stillness of his closet, set on his deci-

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sion. We see the whole case now, through his mind, in absolute quiet. \* He has been on his terrace to look at the stars, and their solemn peace is with him. He feels that he is now alone with God and his old age. And being alone, he is not concise, but garrulous and discursive. Browning makes him so on purpose. But discursive as his mind is, his judgment is clear, his sentence determined. Only, before he speaks, he will weigh all the characters, and face any doubts that may shoot into his conscience. He passes Guido and the rest before his spiritual tribunal, judging not from the legal point of view, but from that which his Master would take at the Judgment Day. How have they lived, what have they made of life? When circumstances invaded them with temptation, how did they meet temptation? Did they declare by what they did that they were on God's side or the devil's? And on these lines he delivers his sentence on Pompilia, Caponsacchi, Guido, Pietro, Violante, and the rest. He feels he speaks as the Vicegerent of God.

This solemn, silent, lonely, unworldly judgment of the whole case, done in God's presence, is, after the noisy, crowded, worldly judgment of it by Rome after the rude humours of the law, and the terrible clashing of human passions, most impressive; and it rises into the majesty of old age in the summing up of the characters of Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and Guido. I wish Browning had left it there. But he makes a sudden doubt invade the Pope with a chill. Has he judged rightly in think-

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ing that divine truth is with him ? Is there any divine truth on which he may infallibly repose ?

And then for many pages we are borne away into a theological discussion, which I take leave to say is wearisome ; and which, after all, lands the Pope exactly at the point from which he set out—a conclusion at which, as we could have told him beforehand, he would be certain to arrive. We might have been spared this. It is an instance of Browning's pleasure in intellectual discourse which had, as I have said, such sad results on his imaginative work. However, at the end, the Pope resumes his interest in human life. He determines ; and quickly—" Let the murderer die to-morrow."

Then comes the dreadful passion of Guido in the condemned cell, of which I have spoken. And then, one would think the poem would have closed. But no, the epilogue succeeds, in which, after all the tragedy, humour reigns supreme. It brings us into touch with all that happened in this case after the execution of Guido ; the letters written by the spectators, the lawyer's view of the deed, the gossip of Rome upon the interesting occasion. No piece of humour in Browning's poetry, and no portrait-sketching is better than the letter written by a Venetian gentleman in Rome giving an account of the execution. It is high comedy when we are told that the Austrian Ambassador, who had pleaded for Guido's life, was so vexed by the sharp " no " of the Pope (even when he had told the Pope that he had probably dined at the same table with Guido), that he very nearly refused to come to the

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execution, and would scarcely vouchsafe it more than a glance when he did come—as if this conduct of his were a slight which the Pope would feel acutely. Nor does Browning's invention stop with this inimitable letter. He adds two other letters which he found among the papers; and these give to the characters of the two lawyers, new turns, new images of their steady professional ambition not to find truth, but to gain the world.

One would think, after this, that invention would be weary. Not at all! The Augustinian monk who attended Pompilia has not had attention enough; and this is the place, Browning thinks, to show what he thought of the case, and how he used it in his profession. So, we are given a great part of the sermon he preached on the occasion, and the various judgments of Rome upon it.

It is wonderful, after invention has been actively at work for eleven long books, pouring forth its waters from an unfailing fountain, to find it, at the end, as gay, as fresh, as keen, as youthful as ever. This, I repeat, is the excellence of Browning's genius—fulness of creative power, with imagination in it like a fire. It does not follow that all it produces is poetry; and what it has produced in *The Ring and the Book* is sometimes, save for the metre, nothing better than prose. But this is redeemed by the noble poetry of a great part of it. The book is, as I have said, a mixed book—the central arena of that struggle in Browning between prose and poetry with a discussion of which this chapter began, and with the mention of which I finish it.

## CHAPTER XVII

### LATER POEMS.

A JUST appreciation of the work which Browning published after *The Ring and the Book* is a difficult task. The poems are of various kinds, on widely separated subjects; and with the exception of those which treat of Balaustion, they have no connection with one another. Many of them must belong to the earlier periods of his life, and been introduced into the volumes out of the crowd of unpublished poems every poet seems to possess. These, when we come across them among their middle-aged companions, make a strange impression, as if we found a white-thorn flowering in an autumnal woodland; and in previous chapters of this book I have often fetched them out of their places, and considered them where they ought to be – in the happier air and light in which they were born. I will not discuss them again, but in forming any judgment of the later poems they must be discarded.

The struggle to which I have drawn attention between the imaginative and intellectual elements in Browning, and which was equally balanced in *The Ring and the Book*, continued after its publication, but with a steady lessening of the imaginative and a steady increase of the intellectual elements. One poem, however, written before the publication

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of *The Ring and the Book*, does not belong to this struggle. This is *Hervé Riel*, a ballad of fire and joy and triumph. It is curiously French in sentiment and expression, and the eager sea-delight in it is plainly French, not English in feeling. Nor is it only French; it is Breton in audacity, in self-forgetfulness, in carelessness of reward, and in loyalty to country, to love and to home. If Browning had been all English, this transference of himself into the soul of another nationality would have been wonderful, nay, impossible. As it is, it is wonderful enough; and this self-transference—one of his finest poetic powers—is nowhere better accomplished than in this poem, full of the salt wind and the leap and joy of the sea-waves; but even more full, as was natural to Browning, of the Breton soul of *Hervé Riel*.

In *Balaustion's Adventure* (1871) which next appeared, the imaginative elements, as we have seen, are still alive and happy; and though they only emerge at intervals in its continuation, *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875), yet they do emerge. Meanwhile, between *Balaustion's Adventure* and the end of 1875, he produced four poems—*Prince Hohenstiel Schwangau*, *Saviour of Society*; *Fifine at the Fair*; *Red Cotton Nightcap Country, or Turf and Towers*; and *The Inn Album*. They are all long, and were published in four separate volumes. In them the intellectual elements have all but completely conquered the imaginative. They are, however, favourite "exercise-places" for some of his admirers, who think that they derive poetic

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pleasures from their study. The pleasure these poems give, when they give it, is not altogether a poetic pleasure. It is chiefly the pleasure of the understanding called to solve with excitement a huddle of metaphysical problems. They have the name but not the nature of poetry.

They are the work of my Lord Intelligence—attended by wit and fancy—who sits at the desk of Poetry, and with her pen in his hand. He uses the furniture of poetry, but the goddess herself has left the room. Yet something of her influence still fills the air of the chamber. In the midst of the brilliant display that fancy, wit, and intellect are making, a soft steady light of pure song burns briefly at intervals, and then is quenched; like the light of stars seen for a moment of quiet effulgence among the crackling and dazzling of fireworks.

The poems are, it is true, original. We cannot class them with any previous poetry. They cannot be called didactic or satirical. The didactic and satirical poems of England are, for the most part, artificial, concise, clear. These poems are not artificial, clear or concise. Nor do they represent the men and women of a cultured, intellectual and conventional society, such as the poetry of Dryden and Pope addressed. The natural man is in them—the crude, dull, badly-baked man—what the later nineteenth century called the real man. We see his ugly, sordid, contemptible, fettered soul, and long for Salinguerra, or Lippo Lippi, or even Caliban. The representations are then human enough, with this kind of humanity, but they

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might have been left to prose. Poetry has no business to build its houses on the waste and leprous lands of human nature ; and less business to call its work art. Realism of this kind is not art, it is science.

Yet the poems are not scientific, for they have no clarity of argument. Their wanderings of thought are as intertangled as the sheep-walks on league after league of high grasslands. When one has a fancy to follow them, the pursuit is entertaining ; but unless one has the fancy, there are livelier employments. The chief interest is the impression they give us of a certain side of Browning's character. They are his darling debauch of cleverness, of surface-psychology. The analysis follows no conventional lines, does not take or oppose any well-known philosophical side. It is not much more than his own serious or fantastic thinking indulging itself with reckless abandon—amusing itself with itself. And thus gives them a humanity—a Browning humanity—outside of their subjects.

The subjects too, though not delightful, are founded on facts of human life. *Bishop Blougram* was conceived from Cardinal Wiseman's career, *Mr. Sludge* from Mr. Home's. *Prince Hohenstiel Schwangau* explains and defends the expediency by which Napoleon III. directed his political action. *The Inn Album*, *Red Cotton Nightcap Country*, are taken from actual stories that occurred while Browning was alive, and *Fifine at the Fair* analyses a common crisis in the maturer lives of men and women. The poems thus keep close to special



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cases, yet—and in this the poet appears—they have an extension which carries them beyond the particular subjects into the needs and doings of a wider humanity. Their little rivers run into the great sea. They have then their human interest for a reader who does not wish for beauty, passion, imagination, or the desires of the spirit in poetry he likes, but who hankers at his solitary desk after realistic psychology, fanciful ethics, curiosities of personal philosophy, cold intellectual play with argument, and honest human ugliness.

Moreover, the method Browning attempts to use in them for the discovery of truth is not the method of poetry, nor of any of the arts. It is almost a commonplace to say that the world of mankind and each individual in it only arrives at the truth on any matter, large or small, by going through and exhausting the false forms of that truth—and a very curious arrangement it seems to be. It is this method Browning pursues in these poems. He represents one after another various false or half-true views of the matter in hand, and hopes in that fashion to clear the way to the truth. But he fails to convince partly because it is impossible to give all or enough of the false or half-true views of any one truth, but chiefly because his method is one fitted for philosophy or science, but not for poetry. Poetry claims to see and feel the truth at once. When the poet does not assert that claim, and act on it, he is becoming faithless to his art.

Browning's method in these poems is the method of a scientific philosopher, not of an artist. He

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gets his man into a debateable situation ; the man debates it from various points of view ; persons are introduced who take other aspects of the question, or personified abstractions such as *Sagacity*, *Reason*, *Fancy* give their opinions. Not satisfied with this, Browning discusses it again from his own point of view. He is then like the chess-player who himself plays both red and white ; who tries to keep both distinct in his mind, but cannot help now and again taking one side more than the other ; and who is frequently a third person aware of himself as playing red, and also of himself as playing white ; and again of himself as outside both the players and criticising their several games. This is no exaggerated account of what is done in these poems. Three people, even when the poems are monologues, are arguing in them, and Browning plays all their hands, even in *The Inn Album*, which is not a monologue. In *Red Cotton Nightcap Country*, when he has told the story of the man and woman in all its sordid and insane detail, with comments of his own, he brings the victim of mean pleasure and mean superstition to the top of the tower whence he throws himself down, and, inserting his intelligence into the soul of the man, explains his own view of the situation. In *Prince Hohenstiel Schwangau*, we have sometimes what Browning really thinks, as in the beginning of the poem, about the matter in hand, and then what he thinks the Prince would think, and then, to complicate the affair still more, the Prince divides himself, and makes a personage called *Sagacity*

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argue with him on the whole situation. As to *Fifine at the Fair*—a poem it would not be fair to class altogether with these—its involutions resemble a number of live eels in a tub of water. Don Juan changes his personality and his views like a player on the stage who takes several parts ; Elvire is a gliding phantom with gliding opinions ; Fifine is real, but she remains outside of this shifting scenery of the mind ; and Browning, who continually intrudes, is sometimes Don Juan and sometimes himself and sometimes both together, and sometimes another thinker who strives to bring, as in the visions in the poem, some definition into this changing cloudland of the brain. And after all, not one of the questions posed in any of the poems is settled in the end. I do not say that the leaving of the questions unsettled is not like life. It is very like life, but not like the work of poetry, whose high office it is to decide questions which cannot be solved by the understanding.

Bishop Blougram thinks he has proved his points. Gigadibs is half convinced he has. But the Bishop, on looking back, thinks he has not been quite sincere, that his reasonings were only good for the occasion. He has evaded the centre of the thing. What he has said was no more than intellectual fencing. It certainly is intellectual fencing of the finest kind. Both the Bishop and his companion are drawn to the life ; yet, and this is the cleverest thing in the poem, we know that the Bishop is in reality a different man from the picture he makes of himself. And the truth which in his

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talk underlies its appearance acts on Gigadibs and sends him into a higher life. The discussion—as it may be called though the Bishop only speaks—concerning faith and doubt is full of admirable wisdom, and urges me to modify my statement that Browning took little or no interest in the controversies of his time. Yet, all through the fencing, nothing is decided. The button is always on the Bishop's foil. He never sends the rapier home. And no doubt that is the reason that his companion, with "his sudden healthy vehemence" did drive his weapon home into life—and started for Australia.

Mr. Sludge, the medium, excuses his imposture, and then thinks "it may not altogether be imposture. For all he knows there may really be spirits at the bottom of it. He never meant to cheat; yet he did cheat. Yet, even if he lied, lies help truth to live; and he must live himself; and God may have made fools for him to live on;" and many other are the twists of his defence. The poem is as lifelike in its insight into the mind of a supple cheat as it is a brilliant bit of literature; but Browning leaves the matter unconcluded, as he would not have done, I hold, had he been writing poetry. Prince Hohenstiel's defence of expediency in politics is made by Browning to seem now right, now wrong, because he assumes at one time what is true as the ground of his argument, and then at another what is plainly false, and in neither case do the assumptions support the arguments. What really is concluded is not the

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question, but the slipperiness of the man who argues. And at the end of the poem Browning comes in again to say that words cannot be trusted to hit truth. Language is inadequate to express it. Browning was fond of saying this. It does not seem worth saying. In one sense it is a truism ; in another it resembles nonsense. Words are the only way by which we can express truth, or our nearest approach to what we think it is. At any rate, silence, in spite of Maeterlinck, does not express it. Moreover, with regard to the matter in hand, Browning knew well enough how a poet would decide the question of expediency he has here brought into debate. He has decided it elsewhere ; but here he chooses not to take that view, that he may have the fun of exercising his clever brain. There is no reason why he should not entertain himself and us in this way ; but folk need not call this intellectual jumping to and fro a poem, or try to induce us to believe that it is the work of art.

When we had finished these products of a time when he was intoxicated with his intellect, and of course somewhat proud of it, the poet in him began to revive. This resurrection had begun in *Fitful at the Fair*. I have said it would not be just to class this poem with the other three. It has many an oasis of poetry where it is a happiness to rest. But the way between their palms and wells is somewhat dreary walking, except to those who adore minute psychology. The poem is pitilessly long. If throughout its length it were easy to follow we might excuse the length, but it is rendered difficult

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by the incessant interchange of misty personalities represented by one personality. Elvire, Fifine only exists in the mind of Don Juan ; their thoughts are only expressed in his words ; their outlines not only continually fade into his, but his thought steals into his presentation of their thought, till it becomes impossible to individualise them. The form in which Browning wrote the poem, by which he made Don Juan speak for them, makes this want of clearness and sharpness inevitable. The work is done with a terrible cleverness, but it is wearisome at the last.

The length also might be excused if the subject were a great one or had important issues for mankind. But, though it has its interest and is human enough, it does not deserve so many thousand lines nor so much elaborate analysis. A few lyrics or a drama of two acts might say all that is worth saying on the matter. What Browning has taken for subject is an every-day occurrence. We are grateful to him for writing on so universal a matter, even though it is unimportant ; and he has tried to make it uncommon and important by weaving round it an intricate lace-work of psychology ; yet, when we get down to its main lines, it is the ordinary event, especially commonplace in any idle society which clings to outward respectability and is dreadfully wearied of it. Our neighbours across the Channel call it *La Crise* when, after years of a quiet, not unhappy, excellent married existence, day succeeding day in unbroken continuity of easy affection and limited experience, the man or the

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woman, in full middle life, suddenly wearies of the apparent monotony, the <sup>the</sup>uneventful love, the slow encroaching tide of the commonplace, and looks on these as fetters on their freedom, as walls which shut them in from the vivid interests of the outside world, from the gipsy roving of the passions. The time arrives, when this becomes, they think, too great for endurance, and their impatience shows itself in a daily irritability quite new in the household, apparently causeless, full of sudden, inexplicable turns of thought and act which turn the peaceful into a tempestuous home. It is not that the husband or the wife are inconstant by nature—to call *Fifine at the Fair* a defence of inconstancy is to lose the truth of the matter—but it is the desire of momentary change, of a life set free from conventional barriers, of an outburst into the unknown, of the desire for new experiences, for something which will bring into play those parts of their nature of which they are vaguely conscious but which are as yet unused—new elements in their senses, intellect, imagination, even in their spirit, but not always in their conscience. That, for the time being, as in this poem, is often shut up in the cellar, where its voice cannot be heard.

This is, as I said, a crisis of common occurrence. It may be rightly directed, its evil controlled, and a noble object chosen for the satisfaction of the impulse. Here, that is not the case ; and Browning describes its beginning with great freshness and force as Juan walks down to the fair with Elvire. Nor has he omitted to treat other forms of it in his

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poetry. He knew how usual it was, but he has here made it unusual by putting it into the heart of a man who, before he yielded to it, was pleased to make it the subject of a wandering metaphysical analysis; who sees not only how it appears to himself in three or four moods, but how it looks to the weary, half-jealous wife to whom he is so rude while he strives to be courteous, and to the bold, free, conscienceless child of nature whose favour he buys, and with whom, after all his barren metaphysics, he departs, only to attain, when his brief spell of foolish freedom is over, loneliness and cynic satiety. It may amuse us to circle with him through his arguments, though every one knows he will yield at last and that yielding is more honest than his talk; but what we ask is—Was the matter worth the trouble of more than two thousand lines of long-winded verse? Was it worth an artist's devotion? or, to ask a question I would not ask if the poem were good art, is it of any real importance to mankind? Is it, finally, anything more than an intellectual exercise of Browning on which solitary psychologists may, in their turn, employ their neat intelligence? This poem, with the exceptions of some episodes of noble poetry, is, as well as the three others, a very harlequinade of the intellect.

I may say, though this is hypercritical, that the name of Don Juan is a mistake. Every one knows Don Juan, and to imagine him arguing in the fashion of this poem is absurd. He would instantly, without a word, have left Elvire, and aban-



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doned Ffine in a few days. The connection then of the long discussions in the poem with his name throws an air of unreality over the whole of it. The Don Juan of the poem had much better have stayed with Elvire, who endured him with weary patience. I have no doubt that he bored Ffine to extinction.

The poems that follow these four volumes are mixed work, half imaginative, half intellectual. Sometimes both kinds are found, separated, in the same poem; sometimes in one volume half the poems will be imaginative and the other half not. Could the imaginative and intellectual elements have now been fused as they were in his earlier work, it were well; but they were not. They worked apart. His wifful poems are all wit, his analytical poems are all analysis, and his imaginative poems, owing to this want of fusion, have not the same intellectual strength they had in other days. *Numpholeptos*, for instance, an imaginative poem, full too of refined and fanciful emotion, is curiously wanting in intellectual foundation.

The *Numpholeptos* is in the volume entitled *Pacchiarotto, and how he Worked in Distemper*. Part of the poems in it are humorous, such as *Pacchiarotto* and *Filippo Baldinucci*, excellent pieces of agreeable wit, containing excellent advice concerning life. One reads them, is amused by them, and rarely desires to read them again. In the same volume there are some severe pieces, sharply ridiculing his critics. In the old days, when he wrote fine imaginative poetry, out of his heart and brain

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working together, he did not mind what the critics said, and only flashed a scuff or two at them in his creation of Naddo in *Sordello*. But now when he wrote a great deal of his poetry out of his brain alone, he became sensitive to criticism. For that sort of poetry does not rest on the sure foundation which is given by the consciousness the imagination has of its absolute rightness. He expresses his needless soreness with plenty of wit in *Pacchiarotto* and in the *Epilogue*, criticises his critics, and displays his good opinion of his work--no doubt of these later poems, like *The Inn Album* and the rest—with a little too much of self-congratulation. "The poets pour us wine," he says, "and mine is strong—the strong wine of the loves and hates and thoughts of man. But it is not sweet as well, and my critics object. Were it so, it would be more popular than it is. Sweetness and strength do not go together, and I have strength."

But that is not the real question. The question is—Is the strength poetical? Has it imagination? It is rough, powerful, full of humanity, and that is well. But is it half prose, or wholly prose? Or is it poetry, or fit to be called so? He thinks that *Prince Hohenstiel*, or *Red Cotton Nightcap Country*, are poetry. They are, it is true, strong; and they are not sweet. But have they the strength of poetry in them, and not the strength of something else altogether? That is the question he ought to have answered, and it does not occur to him.

Yet, he was, in this very book, half-way out of this muddle. There are poems in it, just as strong

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as *The Inn Album*, but with the ineffable spirit of imaginative emotion and thought clasped together in them, so that the strong is stronger, and the humanity deeper than in the pieces he thought, being deceived by the understanding, were more strong than the poems of old. In *Bifurcation*, in *St. Martin's Summer*, the diviner spirit breathes. There is that other poem called *Forgiveness* of which I have already spoken—one of his masterpieces. *Cenciaja*, which may be classed with *Forgiveness* as a study of the passion of hatred, is not so good as its comrade, but its hatred is shown in a mean character and for a meaner motive. And the *Prologue*, in its rhythm and pleasure, its subtlety of thought, its depth of feeling, and its close union of both, recalls his earlier genius.

The first of the *Pisgah Sights* is a jewel. It is like a poem by Goethe, only Goethe would have seen the "sight" not when he was dying, but when he was alive to his finger-tips. The second is not like Goethe's work, nor Browning's; but it is a true picture of what many feel and are. So is *Fears and Scruples*. As to *Natural Magic*, surely it is the most charming of compliments, most enchantingly expressed.

The next volume of original poems was *La Saisiaz* and the *Two Poets of Croisic*. The *Croisic Poets* are agreeable studies, written with verve and lucidity, of two fantastic events which lifted these commonplace poets suddenly into fame. They do well to amuse an idle hour. The end of both is interesting. That of the first, which begins with

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stanza lix, discusses the question : " Who cares, how such a mediocrity as René lived after the fame of his prophecy died out ? " \* And Browning answers—

Well, I care—intimately care to have  
Experience how a human creature felt  
In after life, who bore the burthen grave  
Of certainly believing God had dealt  
For once directly with him—did not rave  
—A maniac, did not find his reason melt  
—An idiot, but went on, in peace or strife,  
The world's way, lived an ordinary life.

The solution Browning offers is interesting, because it recalls a part of the experiences of Lazarus in the *Epistle to Karshish*. René, like Lazarus, but only for a moment, has lived in the eternal.

Are such revelations possible, is his second question. Yes, he answers ; and the form of the answer belongs to the theory of life laid down in *Paracelsus*. Such sudden openings of the greater world are at intervals, as to Abt Vogler, given by God to men.

The end of the second asks what is the true test of the greater poet, when people take on them to weigh the worth of poets—who was better, best, this, that or the other bard ? When I read this I trembled, knowing that I had compared him with Tennyson. But when I heard the answer I

\* René Gentilhomme, page to Prince Condé, heir of France since Louis XIII. and his brother Gaston were childless, is surprised, while writing a love poem, by a lightning flash which shatters a marble ducal crown. He thinks this a revelation from God, and he prophesies that a Dauphin will be born to the childless Queen. The Dauphin was born, and René pushed suddenly into fame.

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trembled no more. "The best poet of any two is the one who leads the happier life. The strong and joyful poet is the greater." But this is a test of the greatness of a man, not necessarily of a poet. And, moreover, in this case, Tennyson and Browning both lived equally happy lives. Both were strong to the end, and imaginative joy was their companion. But the verse in which Browning winds up his answer is one of the finest in his poetry.

So, force is sorrow, and each sorrow, force,  
What then? since Swift<sup>ness</sup> gives the charioteer  
The palm, his hope be in the vivid horse  
Whose neck God clothed with thunder, not the steer  
Sluggish and safe! Yoke Hatred, Crime, Remorse,  
Despair, but ever mid the whirling fear,  
Let, through the tumult, break the poet's face  
Radiant, assured his wild slaves win the race!

*La Saisiaz* is a more important poem: it describes the sudden death of his friend, Ann Egerton Smith, and passes from that, and all he felt concerning it, into an argument on the future life of the soul, with the assumption that God is, and the soul. The argument is interesting, but does not concern us here. What does concern us is that Browning has largely recovered his poetical way of treating a subject. He is no longer outside of it, but in it. He does not use it as a means of exercising his brains only. It is steeped in true and vital feeling, and the deep friendship he had for his friend fills even the theological argument with a passionate intensity. Nevertheless, the argument is perilously near the work of the understanding alone—as if a question like that of immortality could receive any

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solution from the hands of the understanding. Only each man, in the recesses of his own spirit with God, can solve that question for himself, and not for another. That is Browning's position when he writes as a poet, and no one has written more positively on the subject. But when he submits the question to reasoning, he wavers, as he does here, and leaves the question more undecided than anywhere else in his work. This is a pity, but it is the natural penalty of his partial abandonment of the poetic for the prosaic realm, of the imagination for the understanding, of the Reason for reasoning.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE LAST POEMS.

Two volumes of Dramatic Idyls, one in 1879, the other in 1880, followed *La Saisiaz* and *The Two Poets of Croisic*. These are also mixed books, composed, partly of studies of character written in rhythmical prose, and partly of poems wrought out of the pure imagination. Three of them—if they were written at this time—show how the Greek legends still dwelt with Browning; and they brought with them the ocean-scent, heroic life, and mythical charm of Athenian thought. It would be difficult, if one could write of them at all, not to write of them poetically; and *Pheidippides*, *Echellos*, *Pan and Luna* are alive with force, imaginative joy, and the victorious sense the poet has of having conquered his material. *Pheidippides* is as full of fire, of careless heroism as *Hervé Riel*, and told in as ringing verse. The versing of *Echellos*, its rugged, rousing sound, its movement, are in most excellent harmony with the image of the rude, giant "Holder of the ploughshare," who at Marathan drove his furrows through the Persians and rooted up the Mede. Browning has gathered into one picture and one sound the whole spirit of the story. *Pan and Luna* is a bold re-rendering of the myth that Vergil enshrines, and the greater part of it is of such poetic freshness

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that I think it must be a waif from the earlier years of his poetry. Now is there better imaginative work in his descriptive poetry than the image of the naked moon, in virginal distress, flying for refuge through the gazing heaven to the succourable cloud—fleece on fleece of piled-up snow, drowsily patient—where Pan lay in ambush for her beauty.

Among these more gracious idyls, one of singular rough power tells the ghastly tale of the mother who gave up her little children to the wolves to save herself. Browning liked this poem, and the end he added to the story—how the carpenter, Ivan, when the poor frightened woman confessed, lifted his axe and cut off her head; how he knew that he did right, and was held to have done right by the village and its pope. The sin by which a mother sacrificed the lives of her children to save her own was out of nature: the punishment should be outside of ordinary law. It is a piteous tale, and few things in Browning equal the horror of the mother's vain attempt to hide her crime while she confesses it. Nor does he often show greater imaginative skill in metrical movement than when he describes in galloping and pattering verse the grey pack emerging from the forest, their wild race for the sledge and their demon leader.

The other idyls in these two volumes are full of interest for those who care for psychological studies expressed in verse. What the vehicle of verse does for them is to secure conciseness and suggestiveness in the rendering of remote daring, and unexpected



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turns of thought and feeling, and especially of conscience. Yet the poems themselves cannot be called concise. Their subjects are not large enough nor indeed agreeable enough, to excuse their length. Goethe would have put them into a short lyrical form. It is impossible not to regret, as we read them, the Browning of the *Dramatic Lyrics*. Moreover, some of them are needlessly ugly. *Halbert and Hob*—and in *Jocoseria*—*Donald*, are hateful subjects, and their treatment does not redeem them; unlike the treatment of *Ivan Ivanovitch* which does lift the pain of the story into the high realms of pity and justice. Death, swift death, was not only the right judgment, but also the most pitiful. Had the mother lived, an hour's memory would have been intolerable torture. Nevertheless, if Browning, in his desire to represent the whole of humanity, chose to treat these lower forms of human nature, I suppose we must accept them as an integral part of his work; and, at least, there can be no doubt of their ability, and of the brilliancy of their psychological surprises. *Ned Bratts* is a monument of cleverness, as well as of fine characterisation of a momentary outburst of conscience in a man who had none before; and who would have lost it in an hour, had he not been hanged on the spot. The quick, agile, unpremeditated turns of wit in this poem, as in some of the others, are admirably easy, and happily expressed. Indeed, in these later poems of character and event, ingenuity or nimbleness of intellect is the chief element, and it is accompanied by

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a facile power which is sometimes rude, often careless, always inventive, fully fantastical, and rarely imaginative in the highest sense of the word. Moreover, as was not the case of old, they have, beyond the story, a direct teaching aim, which, while it lowers them as art, is very agreeable to the ethical psychologist.

*Jocoseria* has poems of a higher quality, some of which, like the lovely *Never the Time and Place*, have been already quoted. *Ixion* is too obscurely put to attain its end with the general public. But it may be recommended, though vainly, to those theologians who, hungry for the Divine Right of torture, build their God, like Caliban, out of their own mounds; who, foolish enough to believe that the everlasting endurance of evil is a necessary guarantee of the everlasting endurance of good, are still bold and bad enough to proclaim the abominable lie of eternal punishment. They need that spirit of the little child whom Christ placed in the midst of his disciples; and in gaining which, after living the life of the lover, the warrior, the poet, the statesman, *Jochanan Hakkadosh* found absolute peace and joy. Few poems contain more of Browning's matured theory of life than this of the Jewish Rabbi; and its seriousness is happily mingled with imaginative illustrations and with racy wit. The sketch of Tsaddik, who puts us in mind of Wagner in the *Faust*, is done with a sarcastic joy in exposing the Philistine, and with a delight in its own cleverness, which is fascinating.

*Ferishtah's Fancies* and *Parleyings with Certain*

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*People* followed *Jocoseria* in 1884 and 1887. The first of these books is much the better of the two. A certain touch of romance is given by the Dervish, by the Fables with which he illustrates his teaching, and by the Eastern surroundings. Some of the stories are well told, and their scenery is truthfully wrought and in good colour. The subjects are partly theological, with always a reference to human life ; and partly of the affections and their working. It is natural to a poet, and delightful in Browning, to find him in his old age dwelling from poem to poem on the pre-eminence of love, on love as the ultimate judge of all questions. He asserts this again and again ; with the greatest force in *A Pillar at Sebzevar*, and, more lightly, in *Cherries*. Yet, and this is a pity, he is not satisfied with the decision of love, but spends pages in argumentative discussions which lead him away from that poetical treatment of the subjects which love alone, as the master, would have enabled him to give. However, the treatment that love gives we find in the lyrics at the end of each *Fancy* ; and some of these lyrics are of such delicate and subtle beauty that I am tempted to think that they were written at an earlier period, and their *Fancies* composed to fit them. If they were written now, it is plain that age had not disabled him from walking with pleasure and power among those sweet, enamelled meadows of poetry in whose soil he now thought great poetry did not grow. And when we read the lyrics, our regret is all the more deep that he chose the thorn-clad and desert lands,

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where barren argument goes round and round its subjects without ever finding the true path in their centre.

He lost himself more completely in this error in *Parleyings with Certain People*, in which book, with the exception of the visionary landscapes in *Gerard de Lairese*, and some few passages in *Francis Furini* and *Charles Avison*, imagination, such as belongs to a poet, has deserted Browning. He feels himself as if this might be said of him ; and he asks in *Gerard de Lairese* if he has lost the poetic touch, the poetic spirit, because he writes of the soul, of facts, of things invisible—not of fancy's feignings, nor of the things perceived by the senses ? “ I can do this,” he answers, “ if I like, as well as you,” and he paints the landscape of a whole day filled with mythological figures. The passage is poetry ; we see that he has not lost his poetic genius. But, he calls it “ fooling,” and then contrasts the spirit of Greek lore with the spirit of immortal hope and cheer which he possesses, with his faith that there is for man a certainty of Spring. But that is not the answer to his question. It only says that the spirit which animates him now is higher than the Greek spirit. It does not answer the question—Whether *Daniel Bartoli* or *Charles Avison* or any of these *Parleyings* even approach as poetry *Paracelsus*, the *Dramatic Lyrics*, or *Men and Women*. They do not. Nor has their intellectual work the same force, unexpectedness and certainty it had of old. Nevertheless, these *Parleyings*, at the close of the poet's life, and with biographical

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touches which give them vitality, enshrine Browning's convictions with regard to some of the greater and lesser problems of human life. And when his personality is vividly present in them, the argument, being thrilled with passionate feeling, rises, but heavily like a wounded eagle, into an imaginative world.

The sub-consciousness in Browning's mind to which I have alluded—that these later productions of his were not as poetical as his earlier work and needed defence—is the real subject of a remarkable little poem at the end of the second volume of the *Dramatic Idyls*. He is thinking of himself as poet, perhaps of that double nature in him which on one side was quick to see and love beauty; and on the other, to see facts and love their strength. Sometimes the sensitive predominated. He was then the lover of beauty whom everything that touched him urged to song.

“ Touch him ne'er so lightly into song he broke .  
Soil so quick-receptive,—not one feather-seed,  
Not one flower-dust fell but straight its fall awoke  
Vitalising virtue—song would song succeed  
Sudden as spontaneous—prove a poet-soul ! ”

This, which Browning puts on the lips of another, is not meant, we are told, to describe himself. But it does describe one side of him very well, and the origin and conduct of a number of his earlier poems. But now, having changed his manner, even the principles of his poetry, he describes himself as different from that—as a sterner, more iron poet, and the work he now does as more likely to endure,

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and be a power in the world of men. He was curiously mistaken.

Indeed, he cries, is that the soil in which a poet grows ? ●

" Rock's the song-soil rather, surface hard and bare :  
Sun and dew their mildness, storm and frost their rage  
Vainly both expend,—few flowers awaken there :  
Quiet in its cleft broods—what the after-age  
Knows and names a pine, a nation's heritage."

In this sharp division, as in his *Epilogue* to *Pacchiarotto*, he misses the truth. It is almost needless to say that a poet can be sensitive to beauty, and also to the stern facts of the moral and spiritual struggle of mankind through evil to good. All the great poets have been sensitive to both and mingled them in their work. They were ideal and real in both the flower and the pine. They are never forced to choose one or other of these aims or lives in their poetry. They mingled facts and fancies, the intellectual and the imaginative. They lived in the whole world of the outward and the inward, of the senses and the soul. Truth and beauty were one to them. This division of which Browning speaks was the unfortunate result of that struggle between his intellect and his imagination on which I have dwelt. In old days it was not so with him. His early poetry had sweetness with strength, stern thinking with tender emotion, love of beauty with love of truth, idealism with realism, nature with humanity, fancy with fact. And this is the equipment of the great poet. When he divides these qualities each from the other, and

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is only æsthetic or only severe in his realism ; only the worshipper of Nature or only the worshipper of human nature ; only the poet of beauty or only the poet of austere fact ; only the idealist or only the realist ; only of the senses or only of the soul—he may be a poet, but not a great poet. And as the singular pursuit of the realistic is almost always bound up with pride, because realism does not carry us beyond ourselves into the infinite where we are humbled, the realistic poetry loses imagination ; its love of love tends to become self-love, or love of mere cleverness. And then its poetic elements slowly die.

There was that, as I have said, in Browning which resisted this sad conclusion, but the resistance was not enough to prevent a great loss of poetic power. But whatever he lost, there was one poetic temper of mind which never failed him, the heroic temper of the faithful warrior for God and man ; there was one ideal view of humanity which dominated all his work ; there was one principle which directed all his verse to celebrate the struggle of humanity towards the perfection for which God, he believed, had destined it. These things underlie all the poems in *Ferishtah's Fancies* and the *Parleyings with Certain People*, and give to them the uplifted, noble trumpet note with which at times they are animated. The same temper and principle, the same view of humanity emerge in that fine lyric which is the Epilogue to *Ferishtah's Fancies*, and in the Epilogue to *Asolando*.

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The first sees a vision of the present and the future in which all the battle of our life passes into a glorious end ; nor does the momentary doubt that occurs at the close of the poem—that his belief in a divine conclusion of our strife may only have been caused by his own happiness in love—really trouble his conviction. That love itself is part of the power which makes the noble conclusion sure. The certainty of this conclusion made his courage in the fight unwavering, despair impossible, joy in battle, duty ; and to be “ ever a fighter ” in the foremost rank the highest privilege of man.

Then the cloud-rift broadens, spanning earth that's under,  
Wide our world displays its worth, man's strife and  
strife's success :

All the good and beauty, wonder crowning wonder,  
Till my heart and soul applaud perfection, nothing less.

And for that reason, because of the perfectness to come, Browning lived every hour of his life for good and against wrong. He said with justice of himself, and with justice he brought the ideal aim and the real effort together :

I looked beyond the world for truth and beauty :  
Sought, found, and did my duty.

Nor, almost in the very grasp of death, did this faith fail him. He kept, in the midst of a fretful, slothful, wailing world, where prophets like Carlyle and Ruskin were as impatient and bewildered, as lamenting and despondent, as the decadents they despised, the temper of his Herakles in *Balaustion*. He left us that temper as his last legacy, and he



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could not have left us a better thing. We may hear it in his last poem, and bind it about our hearts in sorrow and joy, in battle and peace, in the hour of death and the days of judgment. \*

At the midnight in the silence of the sleep-time

When you set your fancies free,  
Will they pass to where—by death, fools think, imprisoned—

Low he lies who once so loved you, whom you loved so  
—Pity me ?

Oh to love so, be so loved, yet so mistaken

What had I on earth to do  
With the slothful, with the mawkish, the unmanly ?  
Like the aimless, helpless, hopeless, did I drivel  
—Being—who ?

One who never turned his back, but marched breast  
forward,

Never doubted clouds would break,  
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would  
triumph,  
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,  
Sleep to wake

No, at noonday in the bustle of man's work-time

Greet the unseen with a cheer !  
Bid him forward, breast and back as either should be,  
" Strive and thrive ! " cry " Speed,—fight on, fare ever  
There as here ! "

With these high words he ended a long life, and his memory still falls upon us, like the dew which fell on Paradise. It was a life lived fully, kindly, lovingly, at its just height from the beginning to the end. No fear, no vanity, no lack of interest, no complaint of the world, no anger at criticism, no villain fancies disturbed his soul. No laziness, no feebleness in effort, injured his work, no desire for

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money, no faltering of aspiration, no pandering of his gift and genius to please the world, no surrender of art for the sake of fame or filthy lucre, no falseness to his ideal, no base pessimism, no slavery to science yet no boastful ignorance of its good, no morbid naturalism, no devotion to the false forms of beauty, no despair of man, no retreat from men into a world of sickly or vain beauty, no abandonment of the great ideas or disbelief in their mastery, no enfeeblement of reason such as at this time walks hand in hand with the worship of the mere discursive intellect, no lack of joy and healthy vigour and keen inquiry and passionate interest in humanity. Scarcely any special bias can be found running through his work; on the contrary, an incessant change of subject and manner, combined with a strong but not overweening individuality, raced, like blood through the body, through every vein of his labour. Creative and therefore joyful, receptive and therefore thoughtful, at one with humanity and therefore loving; aspiring to God and believing in God, and therefore steeped to the lips in radiant Hope; at one with the past, passionate with the present, and possessing by faith an endless and glorious future—this was a life lived on the top of the wave, and moving with its motion from youth to manhood, from manhood to old age.

There is no need to mourn for his departure. Nothing feeble has been done, nothing which lowers the note of his life, nothing we can regret as less than his native strength. His last poem was like

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the last look of the Phoenix to the sun before the sunlight lights the odorous pyre from which the new-created Bird will spring. And as if the Muse of Poetry wished to adorn the image of his death, he passed away amid a world of beauty, and in the midst of a world endeared to him by love. Italy was his second country. In Florence lies the wife of his heart. In every city he had friends, friends not only among men and women, but friends in every ancient wall, in every fold of Apennine and Alp, in every breaking of the blue sea, in every forest of pines, in every Church and Palace and Town Hall, in every painting that great art had wrought, in every storied market place, in every great life which had adorned, honoured and made romantic, Italy; the great mother of Beauty, at whose breasts have hung and whose milk have sucked all the arts and all the literatures of modern Europe. Venice saw and mourned his death. The sea and sky and mountain glory of the city he loved so well encompassed him with her beauty; and their soft graciousness, their temperate power of joy and life made his departure peaceful. Strong and tender in life, his death added a new fairness to his life. Mankind is fortunate to have so noble a memory, so full and excellent a work to rest upon and love.

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